







## Nights Like These

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/30705746) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/30705746>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Minecraft (Video Game)</a> , <a href="#">Dream SMP</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Wilbur Soot &amp; Technoblade &amp; TommyInnit &amp; Phil Watson</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade &amp; TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot &amp; Technoblade</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Dave   Technoblade</a> , <a href="#">Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Eret (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy</a> , <a href="#">Niki   Nihachu</a> , <a href="#">Karl Jacobs</a> , <a href="#">Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Alexis   Quackity</a> , <a href="#">Badboyhalo - Character</a> , <a href="#">Sam Nook</a>
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Language:	<a href="#">English</a>
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Stats:

Published: 2021-04-15 Completed: 2021-06-24 Words: 107,947  
Chapters: 42/42

# Nights Like These

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## Summary

“This will be good for you, Thomas.”

“Lady, if you call me Thomas one more time, It’s not going to be good for either of us.”

Or: Tommy is 17 when he ends up fostered by Phil, and he really doesn't know what to make of it.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

- Translation into Español available: [Noches como estas](#) by [ScapeSystem](#)

# Chapter 1

“This will be good for you, Thomas.”

“Lady, if you call me Thomas one more time, It’s not going to be good for either of us.”

It was the last conversation Tommy had with his foster mother before the social worker came. She insisted nicknames were childish, but overall she was fine. A bit on the strict side, but nothing like some of his other ‘families’ in the past. Those who had left him in the dark, let him in the cold, left him shaking with hunger pains and bruises and more anxiety than the 17-year-old knew what to do with.

It hadn’t even been a fight, when she told him he was going to a new home. She had simply come into the room with a pinched, sour look on her face and told him he needed to pack. He had been packed for weeks. Since their actual son had come home and told his parents he didn’t want Tommy there anymore. She had even apologized, a few times, saying they wanted it to work out but that it would be worse for everyone if he stayed. She told him she had made sure he would be going to a home that would treat him well, she had bought him new clothes and new shoes and he could have sworn she’d nearly cried when he called her ‘Margaret’ instead of ‘Ma’, like he had been doing for months at this point. He’d been there for nearly a year, and he’d expected to age out of the system under their roof, but he knew, when their 15-year-old kid started screaming about how much he hated Tommy, that it wasn’t going to last.

And now, he was in the social worker’s car, bags neatly placed and full but not overflowing with the pity gifts Margret had bought him. She had re-packed the bags herself, even, to make sure he had everything. Tommy wanted to hate her, and he had been rude when he left, but mostly he just felt empty. He could feel the hole where the sadness and anger should have been, but he was just too tired to feel them.

“Your new foster father is called Phil,” the social worker told him as they swerved through traffic, “He has two sons that live with him, but they’re both in college, so I don’t think you’ll see them too much.”

“Fascinating, Big Man. Please, tell me more,” Tommy rolled his eyes, but did listen while the worker spoke about the home he’d be in. He wondered, briefly, if this would be another 3 week home, or if he’d drag it out, let himself play the patient and mild-tempered kid for ages before they realized it was an act and sent him on his way. Margaret had been a fluke, and staying with her for 11 months had more than doubled the time he had spent in any home previous since being dropped into the system at 9. He watched the city give way to suburbs, and hummed in appreciation as the houses got more and more spaced out. He liked living in places that had big yards. It meant he’d probably be able to go outside even if he wasn’t allowed to leave the house entirely. It was nice.

When they reached the house, it wasn’t anything incredible. Redbrick and beige siding, a driveway with a few cars, a flower garden in the front, and what Tommy thought might be a greenhouse in the back. There was someone with pastel pink hair digging in the garden, and Tommy would have assumed it was a woman if it weren’t for his social worker telling him Phil lived with just his two sons. When the gardener looked up at the new car in the driveway, he did so with a wary squint before standing up. Tommy hadn’t moved to get out of the car yet, but the social worker quickly hopped out and reached a hand toward the stranger in front of him, clearly expecting a handshake. The pink-haired man simply raised an eyebrow, shaking his head just slightly.

“Uh- H-Hello!” The social worker, what was his name? George? Gary? Tommy never bothered to remember, despite knowing him for nearly half his life at this point. “You must be Technoblade! I’m-”

“I know who you are.” Technoblade gave the man a dull stare, “I’m not interested in pleasantries. Hand me the kid’s things so I can get them inside. We don’t need to be friends.” Tommy tried not to smirk at the way the social worker floundered before nodding and opening the door of the car. Tommy pulled himself out of the seat and opened the passenger’s side door to grab the two largest bags, while Technoblade grabbed the other two. They didn’t say a single word to each other, Techno just jerking his head toward the door in a clear sign that they should follow. George followed behind the other two, wringing his hands a bit. The front door opened to reveal another guy, taller and thinner and very clearly high strung grinning like sunshine at the two in front. The smile looked more strained when George passed him into the house, but Tommy didn’t comment. He set his bags down next to where Techno had dropped the others and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Hello! Welcome, welcome, come in!” The tall one said, just on the edge of manic, “You must be Tommy! Dad said you were arriving today, you’re a bit early, but that’s okay! Dad will be home in a minute, he texted and said he was almost here just as you pulled up. Please,

sit down. Do you need anything? Water?" George politely declined, Tommy looked at the man like he'd grown a second, and possibly third, head.

"Are you okay there, buddy? You look like you're about to explode," Tommy teased lightly, testing boundaries. Techno snorted, so he guessed he wasn't going to get in too much trouble for sarcasm.

"I'm fine, fine, just a little nervous, is all! I'm Wilbur, I don't know if you knew that! I'm the oldest, but Tech has been here the longest, and uh, We go to the local University, and our dad, Phil, he's an engineer for the Tech company down the road- It's called, uh, oh what IS it called? Mine- Mine Something? I'm not sure. He's not usually late, you were just early-"

"Wil, take a breath. Jesus." Techno scolded lightly. "You're going to give the whole block a panic attack at this rate." Wilbur flushed bright red and nodded, taking a slow breath and giving Tommy another smile. When they heard a car pull in, everyone turned to see a man in a green jacket come flying through the door, looking exasperated and thrilled at the same time.

"Sorry, I'm late! You're early!" Phil grinned at them. "Welcome, Tommy!" Tommy gave him a smirk. He could tell immediately this wasn't going to last. This guy was way too happy to be willing to be stuck with Tommy for long.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

The first family conversation goes.. less than Ideally

The second George stepped out of the door with Phil once the paperwork was over, the tension in both Wilbur and Techno evaporated. The whole house went from tense, anxious energy to being just very sightly awkward, though most of that was from Tommy himself.

“God, I immediately wanted to kick that guy out. Why, again, do we have to deal with social workers?” Techno grunted, pulling off his gardening gear and throwing it on the table. “No offense, kid. Your taxi driver just irks me.” Tommy snorted, and Wilbur barked out a bitter laugh.

“We just hope this will be an okay fit for *Thomas*, he’s had many issues in previous homes” Wilbur mocked George’s voice with an eye roll. “Gee, I wonder why, when you pricks throw him into places with no information and expect him to just roll with the punches.” Wilbur shook his head, obviously annoyed. He looked over at Tommy with a knowing look. “Want me to show you to your room so you can have your obligatory mental breakdown?” Tommy bristled a bit at that, wanting to deny it, but he really did want to be alone for a few minutes.

“I’m not going to have a mental breakdown. But- uh- yeah, I’d like to know where I can put my stuff.” Wilbur nodded, grabbing one of the larger bags while Techno grabbed two others, leaving Tommy to grab the smallest one, following them up the stairs.

“That’s my room,” Wilbur gestured at a wooden door at the very top of the stairs. “That the bathroom, that’s the upstairs study, Phils room, Phils office, and here’s you!” The door was open, but It was the same wood tone as all the others. The room was moderately sized, a queen-sized bed shoved in a corner and a desk, dresser, and bookshelf against the opposite wall. The bookshelf already had some books on it, and there was a lamp and a plant on the desk, but it was otherwise almost completely undecorated. Plain grey sheets and grey curtains on the window, dark blue carpeting, and a small closet with sliding mirrored doors. Tommy hummed his approval. “It’s boring, but like you, we got next to no information other than you needed a place to stay and you were 17.” Tommy shrugged.

“This is fine. Just somewhere to sleep and do homework anyway, what do I care what it looks like?” Techno grumbled something, and Wilbur laughed, but Tommy didn’t hear him and didn’t bother asking. “Do you mind if I unpack or is your dad going to immediately demand I come down for a lecture on house rules?”

“Nah Dad’s gonna bitch about the foster care system for forty-five minutes before he even remembers he hasn’t introduced himself to you. We’ll keep him distracted for a bit.” Techno shrugged. “Welcome to the shit show, kid.” Wilbur smacked his brother and threw his hands up in exasperation.

“Dad specifically told us to not scare the kid! We had one rule!” But he was grinning. “Go ahead and unpack, child.” Tommy bit his tongue to not tell the guy off for calling him a child, but then the two left the room, Techno softly shutting the door behind him as they went, and Tommy sat down on the bed, bewildered and exhausted, and immediately forgot that he was mad.

He looked around for a few minutes before groaning and pulling himself off the bed. The clothes were unpacked and placed in drawers quickly since he didn’t have to fold anything. He would have thanked Margret if he wasn’t so off-put that she’d kicked him out in the first place. He threw his favorite blanket at the bed, glad they’d let him keep it, and set his spare shoes in the closet, along with his now-empty bags. He sat his iPod on the desk alongside his tangled earbuds and his phone cord. The phone was also a gift from Margret, for his birthday back in the beginning of April. Prepaid and not on a plan so he could keep it after her left. He wondered idly if he should have realized then that he wouldn’t be staying, but when it happened he assumed it was so when he turned 18 he wouldn’t have to worry. ‘Always the optimist.’ He thought to himself bitterly. He wasn’t sure how long he sat there in the ugly, bland room just glaring at his headphones, but he was pulled out of it by a knock on the door.

“Tommy? It’s Phil. Can I open the door?”

“It’s your house, big man. Do what you want.” The door creaked when it was pushed open. Tommy would have to oil the hinges soon, or he’d be caught sneaking out quickly.

“It’s your house, too, you know. A new house sure, but you live here, and you get a say.” Phil smiled softly at the bewildered look on Tommy’s face. “Don’t worry, we don’t need to talk



feelings or anything. Just wanted to see if you wanted to come down and pick something to eat? We're ordering take away, we don't know what you want." Tommy snorted.

"Sure, man. We can talk ground rules and everything." Tommy followed Phil down the stairs, stopping when Phil knocked much more aggressively on Wilbur's door.

"Wil, food. Come downstairs!" Wilbur yelled something back and Phil didn't bother to wait before rolling his eyes at Tommy and continuing down the staircase. "Grown man and still acts like a teenager, I swear." Tommy nodded, feigning amusement at the joke.

"So, both of them live here, even though they're, like, college students?" Tommy asked, figuring he might as well figure out the dynamics a bit.

"Yep! We live pretty close to the school, so it seemed silly for them to get dorms, and anyway, they would have insisted on being roommates and would have killed each other in the first week if I let them share a room." Phil laughed. "Techno threatened to smother Wil with a pillow after staying in the same room with him for three days when we were renovating his room, I can't imagine them having to spend an entire semester together"

"We were kids, and Wil snores like an old man." Techno deadpanned at the two as they entered the dining room. "Don't make me out to be the bad guy in that situation."

"You were nearly 16, and you sleep with earplugs anyway," Phil argued, handing Tommy the takeaway menu. "You were just being a brat" Wilbur's laugh rang through the hall from where he was coming down the staircase.

"Tech? A brat? What else is new?"

"Is it too late to be unadopted? Is George still close enough to come to get me?" Techno asked with a groan. "Me and Tommy can go live with that batshit crazy old lady with the 19 cats and you two can be weird and loud on your own." That actually startled a laugh out of Tommy.

“Didn’t even make it through a meal, that might be a record for leaving. I bet George would get me a medal.” Techno shook his head.

“When I was still in the system I didn’t make it out of the car once. The old lady said ‘oh we’ll have to get his hair cut immediately, I can’t believe you let it get so long’ and I refused to even open the door, so I think I have you beat.”

“Damn, second place then.” Tommy joked, ignoring the way his chest burned at the thought of being friendly. He was mad at himself for the way he wanted to snap at them, but he felt so awkward that they were trying so painfully, obviously, hard to make him feel included. It felt fake, and it makes him sick. “I’ll just get some white rice, Phil,” Tommy said eventually, handing the menu over to Wil. All three of them gave him a weird look.

“That’s not going to be enough to eat. You need to-“ Techno cut Phil off before he could continue.

“Dad. We’ve had this conversation, remember?” Tommy bristled at the sympathetic look Wilbur shot him. “Just let him get the rice. There’s always leftovers over everything else anyway, if he wants something else there will be plenty here.”

“And if he doesn’t want anything else, he doesn’t have to eat anything else,” Wilbur added.

“He can actually speak for himself, weirdly enough.” Tommy snarked, glaring at the three of them. “It’s almost like he’s a whole ass person and not just a decoration.” All three of them looked a little guilty, but he continued anyway. “Besides, I can assure you if I wanted or needed more food you would know. I’m not exactly ‘subtle’.” Tommy snorted, but something in his head called him a liar. “I’m sure my file tells you that anyway.” Tommy leaned on the table, looking around at the three men who were looking incredibly awkward. He felt a little bit of vindictive pleasure at knowing they felt as uncomfortable as he did. “Speaking of my file, I’m sure you read it, so you know we need to talk about what is and isn’t allowed so I know how sneaky I need to be about doing what I want anyway.” Well, apparently his brain decided for him that this was going to be a short-lived home. Phil gave him a strained smile.

“Well, at least you’re honest.” Tommy laughed at that, a short and bitter thing, but a laugh anyway, and most of the tension in the room settled down into just the same slightly uncomfortable atmosphere as before. “We don’t keep alcohol in the house except for the wine

Tech uses to cook, but whatever is here is off-limits, obviously. No smoking in the house, and preferably no smoking out of the house either, but you're 17, so I probably can't stop you one way or the other." Phil grimaced at that. "Don't go into anyone's room without permission, don't leave food sitting out, tell someone before you leave, anyone in the house is fine, just so we know you're gone, and use the front door, for god's sake, don't go through your window, you'll break an arm." Wilbur turned pink at that, rubbing his arm and looking embarrassed. "If you need something, food you like, or whatever, there are lists on the fridge to write it down, we'll put one with your name on it up soon. I'll get it when I go to the shops next. If it's an urgent thing just tell me in person or text me, and I can grab it that day."

"Don't touch Wil's guitar," Techno added.

"Or Tech's jewelry." Wilbur nodded. "But please feel free to hide dad's hat every time he leaves it sitting around, it annoys the hell out of him."

"Don't talk to the weird dude with the Green hoodie and the mask who hangs out around here. He's an asshole." Techno grimaced, and Wil and Phil both nodded.

"Anything else will be figured out as we go, I guess." Phil shrugged.

"Oh, boy," Tommy remarked, turning and leaving the family standing in the dining room, stock-still and surprised at the venom in the kid's voice.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

Communication isn't their strong suit.

"I mean, it could have gone worse, I guess." Techno shrugged, sitting down. "At least he didn't have a panic attack and pass out like Wil."

"At least I didn't punch Dad the first time I met him" Wilbur deadpanned. "Sorry, we screwed up, Dad. I know you want it to work out." Phil sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and smiling at his sons, just slightly strained.

"It's not your fault, boys. We knew adding someone else to the house would have some complications. I'm sure we'll find some solid footing soon." Wil took the menu and stepped into the other room to order the food while Phil sat down next to Techno at the table. "I'm worried about him. I can't imagine being 17 and not having a family. It was hard on you two, and you were both here before you ever even hit high school."

"I think he's gonna be fine, Dad. I don't know a single person alive better than you to give him someone to rely on."

"And if it doesn't work out, we'll figure something out then. And it won't be anyone's fault." Wilbur added, setting a hand on his dad's shoulder. "Whatever the kid needs, yeah?"

"God, when did you two get mature?" Phil laughed, still on the verge of tears. "You're making me feel old."

"You are old." Techno shrugged. They all paused for a second, and then there was laughter echoing through the house.

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Upstairs, Tommy heard none of the conversations, but he did hear the laughter. He clenched his fists and tried to be mad that they were laughing at him, but that hole where the anger and sadness should be just grew a little more. He sat down on the bed, fingers tangled in his hair, feeling both overwhelmed and so, so very empty.

When Phil came to get him for dinner, he hadn't even realized time had passed. He sat in a chair at the table and refused to speak a word, chewing his rice slowly and trying to not look too invested in it. He didn't want his punishment for being rude to be losing his food, and in previous homes, he'd found that making it look like he didn't like the meal he was less likely to get it taken away.

"Dude, you look like the rice personally offended you. Just put it in the fridge," Techno rolled his eyes, gesturing at the kitchen. Tommy bit his cheek to keep from swearing. He had hoped they'd just let him eat in silence, but apparently, he'd gone too far on trying to look disinterested and landed back at not getting to eat anyway. He just nodded blandly and closed the container back up.

"Where in the fridge should it go?" Tommy asked, keeping his voice and face perfectly neutral.

"Wherever there's room, it's not organized or anything," Phil said, frowning. Tommy nodded and left the room, and Phil looked panicked at the other two. "What do we do?" He mouthed, and they both shrugged.

"Maybe he's just nervous. I mean, we are strangers. He'll come down and eat it later, I'm sure." Wilbur whispered back. Phil nodded.

"Do you mind if I shower, or should I wait until you're all done eating?" Tommy asked upon re-entering the room.

"You can shower. There's new shampoo, conditioner, and soap in the bathroom upstairs for you. We can get you new ones you like better later, but they should be okay for now." Phil

gave Tommy a small smile, which Tommy returned, even though it looked almost painful for the teen.

“Thank you,” Tommy forced out around his own rising anxiety. He hated when punishments were based around food. It made him think of his worst houses, of the ones that left his hands shaking and voice failing even years later. But he was fine, he just needed to get used to how they expected him to act and he could adapt. He wasn’t a kid anymore, he knew how to behave and avoid punishments.

He made it upstairs and to the room he was staying in before his hands started shaking, and had grabbed clothes and his personal toiletries, including a towel and wash rag, and made it to the bathroom before his chest was too tight for him to breathe. He locked the door with trembling hands and turned the water on as hot as he could get it before the first sob tore its way out of his throat. He sat on the floor of the shower crying for ten minutes before he could even stand, and by the time he had finished showering his face was back to the same neutral, passive look that he’d had in the dining room. He could hear the family downstairs still talking quietly, but he went back to the room he was staying in and shut the door to muffle it the best he could. He sat on the bed and stared at his hands for the better part of an hour before the speaking quieted. He heard two doors shut, one downstairs and one at the end of the hall, which Tommy assumed were Wilbur and Techno going to their respective rooms. He heard music from Wilbur’s room, not him playing but something that sounded angsty coming from what he assumed was some sort of stereo. Other than that, he could hear someone pacing downstairs, floorboards creaking every few minutes, which he assumed was Phil. After another three hours or so, the music was turned off and he heard Phil go to his own room, and the house was almost totally silent. He wondered if everyone was asleep, but he was quickly told they weren’t by the sound of *someone* on the roof outside his window. He sat up in a panic, throwing open the window to see *Wilbur, of all people*, with a cigarette between his teeth and a stormy look on his face, sitting on the roof outside his own window. He glanced over at Tommy with a nod, raising a finger to his lips in a shushing motion, and went back to staring at nothing.

“Are you.. good?” Tommy asked quietly, not really caring much but not totally heartless. The guy looked like garbage, his hair pulled every which way and his hands shaking just a little.

“I’m fine, yeah. Needed a smoke before bed,” Wilbur shrugged, “Dad would lose it if I smoked in the house and Techno would call me out if he heard the front door open. Didn’t mean to wake you, or freak you out. Sorry.”

“No, no you’re fine, man. Thought someone was breaking in. Uh, goodnight, I guess,” Tommy grimaced before leaning back in and shutting the window. What a weirdo. He pulled the curtains closed and laid in his bed for another 15 minutes before he heard Wilbur go back into his room and shut the other window. He waited another hour before giving up and actually going to sleep himself.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

The first morning

## Chapter Notes

TW for perceived child abuse and panic attacks

The following morning, Tommy woke up to shouting. It was a Saturday, but he could tell it was still very, very early by the way the sun just barely lit up the room, still rising. The shouting was Phil and Wilbur, arguing loudly, but Tommy could only hear every few words, something about sleeping, and doctors.

Tommy heard a crack echo through the house, and everything fell deadly silent. Tommy couldn't keep his hands from shaking if he tried. He wasn't sure who hit who, but it sounded bad. He heard another door slam open, and then Techno's voice, much calmer than the other two. He heard crying, then, which must have been Wilbur, because Phil's voice was much softer when he started speaking. Tommy couldn't make out what was being said over the pounding in his ears. He couldn't breathe. Didn't Margaret say she made sure this would be safe? Was she lying? Tommy couldn't see, still frozen in bed. When someone gently knocked on his door, he feigned sleep, curling up and hiding his face, evening out his breathing as best he could. He heard the door open, and heard Techno whisper to him,

"Tommy? Are you awake?" Tommy didn't respond, and it seemed to satisfy Techno, who softly closed the door and spoke to the house, "kid must sleep like the dead, he's still out. You two really have to-" Tommy couldn't hear the rest, as he'd gone back down the steps and to wherever the others were.

Nearly three hours later, Tommy slowly came downstairs to see Wilbur curled up on the couch, asleep, and Phil sitting at the kitchen table, which was covered in textbooks and papers.



“Hey, mate. Sorry about the mess, Wil will clean it up when he wakes up, he was just studying out here last night.”

“Last night? Didn’t he.. go to sleep?” Tommy asked, stepping towards the table to look at the books and papers. It all seemed complicated, history and maths far beyond anything Tommy bothered to know.

“Apparently not, no,” Phil grimaced. “He was here when I woke up at Four, shaking and trying to work through calculus.” Phil rolled his eyes. “Kid’s going to burn himself out by 25 at this rate.” Techno hummed his agreement as he walked in, setting a plate of food in front of Phil.

“Idiot could have just asked for help, but instead he chose to panic in the dining room instead.” Techno shook his head. “Sorry, Tommy, I didn’t know you were up. You didn’t eat last night, so if you give me a second I’m sure I can-“

“No, no, it’s okay. I’m.. not really hungry anyway,” Tommy lied, not wanting to know what he’d have to do to earn back the food, and knowing he was far too shaky and anxious to effectively do any chores right now. “Maybe, maybe later on today, though?”

“Sure, just let me know.” Techno shrugged, giving him a confused smile. Tommy let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, nodding. “Do you want some water? Tea? We have coffee too but it’s still brewing.” Tommy shook his head. “Ah.. alright. I’m gonna.. go check on Wil, then.” He gave an awkward thumbs up and ducked into the living room.

“You sure you don’t want food, mate? It has to have been a while since you’ve eaten, George said you hadn’t eaten lunch when he dropped you off.” Phil seemed so nice, now, that it terrified Tommy, how could he go from screaming and potentially hitting Wil to being so.. normal?

“No, thank you. I’m fine. Why were you up so early?” Tommy asked, hoping to get some information about the fight without making it obvious he knew.

“Oh, I get up early most days for work, so I try to keep the schedule on my off days, too. I’m usually the only one up, mornings are usually my only free time when the boys aren’t in school, but..” he gestured at the papers on the table, “not always.”

“Oh, that must be frustrating, wanting alone time but not getting it,” Tommy tried to sympathize, hating himself only a little for how quickly he sold out Wilbur. He owed him no loyalty, whatever he needed to do to stay on Phil’s good side he’d do,

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I don’t mind any of you being up in the mornings. The problem was just that Wil hadn’t slept. He overworks himself, both of them do if I’m being honest, and it’s always upsetting seeing your kid having a breakdown before then sun’s even properly risen.” Phil shakes his head. “He’ll be alright, just needs some time to rest today and he’ll feel better once exams are over.” Tommy nodded. Phil said it was upsetting, to see Wil stressed, which felt like the understatement of the year. When it had lead to such an argument. They sat in silence for a few more minutes before Wilbur and Techno both came back into the dining room, Techno’s hands on Wilbur’s shoulders as he guided him to a chair.

“Sit. I will bring you coffee and food. Do not touch the homework or I will burn it.” Techno threatened, though he had a small smile on his face. Tommy shuddered a bit at the casual threat of violence, even though he could tell Techno didn’t mean it, and more at the way neither of the others reacted at all, as if it were completely normal. Wil nodded, leaning his face in a hand and glancing around the room sleepily.

“Sorry for yelling, Dad. I know you weren’t trying to ruin my life.” Wilbur apologized, half mumbled.

“I’m sorry too, I shouldn’t have yelled back when I know how stressed you are. I just want you to take *care of yourself*, Wil.” Wilbur nodded, smiling at Phil.

“Thank you. And Tommy, I know you slept through it, but I’m sorry if you happened to hear any of that. I’m sure that’s a miserable way to wake up in a new house.” Tommy feigned ignorance.

“No apologies necessary, big man, I didn’t hear a thing.” Wilbur smiled at him, and turned back to the doorway where the kitchen was.

“Tech, can I have some juice, too?”

“Sure, Wil. Apple?” Techno sounded exasperated, but he came through the door with coffee and a cup of juice in hand that he definitely did not have time to pour after Wil asked, so he had almost certainly had it ready.

“Thank you.” Wilbur said softly, taking the cups. “I know I’ve apologized already, but I’m really sorry, Tech. I know you hate the yelling.”

“Wilbur. My brother. My friend. If you apologize one more time I’m taking away your right to say the word sorry for a month.” Techno huffed. “It’s fine. I’m fine, Dad’s fine, Tommy probably isn’t fine but that’s just because he has to deal with our weird asses at 7 AM.” Tommy held up in hands in a placating way.

“All good here, my friends.”

“See? Even Tommy is fine. The only person not fine is you, so let’s focus on that, yeah?” Wilbur bit his lip, but nodded. “Good. Do you want fruit or a smoothie?”

“Just the fruit, please.” Wilbur said, “and maybe some toast?”

“Sure.” Techno went back into the kitchen, and Wilbur looked at Tommy like he just realized he was there, even though they’d spoken already.

“You aren’t eating? Or did you finish already?”

“No, I’m not really feeling up to it right now.”

“Oh, okay. You should try smoothies. Used.. used to not be able to eat in the mornings either,” Wil yawned loudly, “but I got myself used to it eventually.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Tommy agreed, unsure if Wilbur had forgotten he’d been punished last night or if he assumed he had just already done something to earn back eating privileges. “You, uh, okay?” Tommy asked, noticing the way Wilbur was shaking. “You’re a little shaky.” Phil raised his eyebrows at that, watching Wilbur with what looked like concern.

“Mm.. I’m okay. I think it’s the not sleeping.” Wil said with a sigh. “It’ll go away when I rest.”

“Did you sleep the night before last?” Tommy asked, surprising himself as much as he apparently surprised Wil.

“Yeah, I did. Why?”

“You were shaking yesterday too, I thought it was just my imagination, but, well,” Tommy held a hand up, and they could all see the light tremor in it. “It’s familiar.” Wilbur’s face scrunched up in displeasure before he nodded.

“I get kind of twitchy when I’m anxious. New people freak me out a little, and social workers freak me out a lot.”

“If it makes you feel better, I once watched a seven year old take George out, so you would definitely win in that fight. And frankly, you could probably take me too, but I’m pretty sure if I even looked at you funny Technoblade would end me where I stood.” Tommy snorted. “You’re definitely safe.” Wilbur let out a breathy laugh at that.

“Well what has you so anxious then, if we’re talking about it?”

“I have a tendency to look at people funny.” Tommy joked, and from the kitchen Techno let out a chuckle.

“Sorry, I only fight people on Thursday’s.” He yelled, then came into the dining room with a bowl of fruit and a plate of toast, which he sat in front of Wilbur. “But if you’d like to schedule an appointment, I think I can squeeze ya in.”

“Hard pass, I’d like to survive my first week here at the very least.” Tommy remarks. “Maybe the week after though, bet by then I’ll have your tricks figured out.” Techno lets out an actual laugh at that.

“Well you clocked shaky over here in the course of 12 hours so I wouldn’t put it past you.” Wilbur just flipped techno off from where he was shoving fruit in his mouth. “Very classy. Incredibly dignified, even. The epitome of grace, one Wilbur Soot.”

“Says the man with pancake batter on his shirt.” Phil teased. Techno glared at Phil for a second before gently shoving him, grunting out a quiet ‘piss off, old man’ before leaning back against the door frame with a grin.

They all seemed so casual, picking and joking like the fight was so normal and common that it didn’t even strain the dynamic. Tommy briefly wondered if he had been placed with sociopaths, and they really weren’t bothered by the fighting. Maybe he was just too sensitive. He just hated fighting, he always got so nervous around the foster parents who used physical violence to express their anger. He wasn’t weak, and he could take a punch, but hiding bruises was hard, and he’d never been a great liar. He guessed he could make the new school think he was clumsy, which he was, and they wouldn’t question it much. He wondered if they would accept that at face value. Some schools would, while others tended to pry-

“-ommy? Bud? You okay?” Wilbur was watching him, looking a little panicky again. “Can you hear me?” Tommy glanced at him, but now that he was aware, he could feel his heart beating up into his throat. He couldn’t force his mouth to move, and his chest felt tight. Was he having a panic attack? Was he dying? Nothing had even happened, but suddenly everything was overwhelming, and he needed to leave, but his legs felt like they’d just disappeared out from under him. He vaguely heard Wilbur tell someone to dim the light, but his head was spinning, and he couldn’t figure out why. “Tommy? What happened? Can you tell me what you need?” Wilbur was closer now, but not touching, just hovering close enough that Tommy could hear him, even though he was whispering. Tommy shook his head, trying to force himself to talk, but just a choked gasp came out. “Okay, you can’t talk, that’s okay. Uh, can, can you follow my breathing? Do you know the 4-7-8 method?” Tommy nodded, and started tapping it out on his knee himself, ignoring Wilbur completely. When buzzing in

his head started to fade, he realized all three of them were staring at him incredulously. He didn't comment, and kept up his tapping to keep his counts even for another dozen breaths before stopping.

"Did.. did you just bring yourself down from the height of a major panic attack?" Techno sounded mildly impressed and simultaneously disgusted. "How many times do you have to panic alone to even learn how to do that? Can either of you do that?" Wilbur and Phil both shook their heads, looking equally thrown off. "Dude, what?" Tommy swallowed before let out a shaky,

"Well, that fucking sucked." Wilbur laughed, but both Phil and Techno still looked a little shell shocked. "Sorry, I don't actually know what caused that. I was just thinking and freaked myself out apparently."

"You sound totally normal again. Phil, why does he sound normal again?" Techno asked, looking bewildered. "You sound just like you did before."

"Well, yeah, that's what happens when you stop panicking. You go back to that fun state of not being panicked." Tommy joked, shaking his head. Wilbur furrowed his brow, inspecting Tommy like he was a new species.

"You're still shaking." Wilbur commented.

"I don't stop." Tommy agreed. "I don't even remember the last time I didn't look like I was cold or left on vibrate."

"But you can pull yourself out of a panic attack like it's an olympic sport and you're a gold medalist?" Techno asked.

"You're really caught up on that," Tommy scoffed. "Of course I can pull myself out of a panic attack, I'm 17. It's not like I'm going to have someone holding my hand every time I let my brain run loose." Then Tommy laughed, and it wasn't even strained. "Can you imagine?" But nobody else in the room looked amused, they just looked sad. "Jesus, what

happened? Did I actually die? Am I a ghost? I don't think we've known each other long enough for you to actually mourn my passing, guys, no offense."

"How.. long have you been able to do that?" Phil asked, quietly.

"Uh, a few years, probably? Definitely since I was 13, but could have been younger. I've had em since I was like 6, apparently. Since before foster care." He shrugged. "It's a good skill to have."

"God, I can't get over how calm you are. I thought I had a hard time expressing emotions, but even I can't turn them *off*." Techno shivered.

"What are you talking about? You wear your emotions all over your face." Tommy teased. "If you want to hide your emotions you're going to have to hide your eyebrows." Techno's eyebrows shot up at that, and Tommy laughed again. "Exactly! See, you're surprised and confused. And before that you were concerned and annoyed. You couldn't even pretend to be mad at Wilbur when you made him breakfast, your face was all soft." Phil looked bewildered, glancing between his two sons and Tommy in rapid succession.

"What, just like that? Just like that, three conversations in and you already know their tells?" Phil was laughing a little now, looking at Tommy like he'd done something incredible.

"Well, sure. I *have* to be good at reading people. If you don't learn how you end up making people mad, or making friends with the wrong ones." Tommy shrugged. He felt much calmer now, knowing that he apparently wasn't going to be in trouble for anxiety attacks. "Honestly, out of the three of you, Wilbur's the one who I'd take as the emotionally stunted one." Wilbur bristled, shooting Tommy a small glare before his face smoothed back out. Tommy did his best to hide his smirk. "I mean, look at him, dude's staying up to work on homework instead of sleeping because he's unable to ask for help." Tommy cocked an eyebrow at Wilbur to make sure they both knew he had more to say on the matter and was choosing not to. A silent agreement to be on the same side.

Conversation lightened at that, though Technoblade asked a few more times how Tommy was so calm. They teased lightly back and forth for another few minutes before Phil announced he was going to his office to get some work done, and Techno sat down at the table with his own

breakfast and his phone in hand. Wil started gathering up the homework, his hands stilling every thirty seconds or so as to read a line of text on a page.”

“You know, that homework will still be there after you sleep. I can make sure nobody messes with it, if you want.” Tommy offered. It definitely seemed like his best bet was to make nice with Wil and Techno if he wanted to keep on Phil’s good side. “You’re going to work yourself back up trying to do it on two hours of piss-poor sleep.”

“Yeah well, at least I didn’t pretend to be asleep so my family wouldn’t know I heard them fighting at 4AM.” Wilbur shot back, only looking half serious. “There’s no chance in hell a foster kid with more than a decade in the system sleeps through someone slamming a book like that, even if they can ignore the yelling.” Immediately Tommy went from mostly disinterested to protective. He usually patched up his foster siblings when they got hurt, and the ones older than him were no exception.

“Holy shit, he hit you with a *book*?” Tommy jumped up to fret over Wil immediately. “Christ, is anything broken? Why the hell are you acting so calm after that, what the *fuck* .” He pulled Wilbur’s shocked face toward him. “You aren’t supposed to sleep if you get hit hard, dumbass. It’s how you slip into a coma.” Tommy was shining his phone flashlight at Wilbur’s eyes, checking to make sure they dilated correctly before Wil even said a word. “Well you aren’t concussed, probably. That’s good.” Tommy started muttering to himself about injuries and was promptly cut off by Wil grabbing his wrist.

“Tommy.” Tommy ignored him. Books were heavy, they were meant to cause damage. How the hell had Phil gone through the system for so long, keeping two kids, if he was that violent? “Tommy, will you listen to me?” Wilbur’s voice took on a sharp edge that had Tommy going stock still. “Phil didn’t hit me with a book, why do you think that?”

“What, you hit him?” Tommy asked, incredulous. “You don’t look like the physical violence type, no offense.”

“Nobody hit anyone.” Techno said, voice firm. “We don’t fight like that here.” Tommy let out a sigh.

“I’m not, like, going to sell you dad out of anything, relax. Just tell me where you’re hurt so I can make sure you’re okay and I’ll go back to pretending like I didn’t hear you crying and



sounding like you thought you were going to die.” Tommy snarked. “I’m sure you both have some first aid knowledge but I’ve been doing this particular song and dance for a while.”

“Tommy. I slammed the book on the *table* . Phil was yelling because I was yelling and we both got in over our heads. The fight was because I went off my sleeping meds so I could stay up to study, and I lied to him and my doctor about it. I had a panic attack, and when I get them I usually can’t tell where I am and get overwhelmed, thinking I’m back with my birth parents or some other shitty house.

Phil was talking me down from it, Techno came out and helped, and they made me take a nap on the couch. I wasn’t physically hurt and any mental pain was caused by myself. Phil was helping me, not hurting me, and he has never and will never hurt me, Tech, or you.”

Wilbur thought he was being honest, he could tell, but it didn’t add up in his head anyway. He could tell by the way Phil’s hands were scarred and the hard glare in his eyes that the man was a fighter, and had been for a long time. Tommy idly wondered how long it had taken to brainwash these two into believing he was a saint. He wondered how long he would last in the house once Phil realized he couldn’t do the same to Tommy.

“Sure, whatever you say, big man.” Tommy agreed at last. Wilbur nodded once, and went back to straightening his papers, and then mumbled a quiet

“I’m going to nap again. Wake me up for lunch.” And left the room.

“Wil’s telling you the truth, you know.” Techno said to Tommy after a few tense moments. “Phil would never hit kids.”

“You’ve been here the longest, right?” Tommy asked, looking at Techno. He nodded. “If you believe that, so wholeheartedly, why’re you afraid of him?” Techno’s eyebrows went so high they nearly disappeared into his hairline. “You tense up when he talks, sometimes. Wil doesn’t, but you do.” Techno huffed out a laugh.

“He’s an intimidating guy, but I’m not afraid *of* him, not really. I’ve seen Phil do some scary shit, but he’s never, *ever* , hurt a kid.” Techno shrugged. “Honestly out of everyone here, I’m

the most likely to lose my temper, and even then I wouldn't hit a kid, I'd probably just lock myself in my room and beat the shit out of my punching bag."

"No, Wil would definitely lose his temper." Tommy shrugged. "Dudes strung so tight I'm surprised he hasn't snapped."

"He's not always like that. It's exams that have him wound up. He'll pass them, come home, go comatose for like four days, and then be his actual self. You'll barely recognize him." Tommy could tell how firmly he believed it, but it didn't sit right with him anyway, just like Wilbur with Phil. Was everyone here convinced the others were gods? That seemed unhealthy.

"Whatever you say, man. On that note, I think I'm going to change and go wander around town. That's cool right?" Techno nodded.

"Lunch is at 1 ish usually, if you're planning on eating here be back before then. If not, dinner's at 6:30, so you'll need to be back before that. I'll let them know you left."

"Thanks," Tommy stood and went back to the bedroom, changing quickly and slipping outside before Techno had anything else to say.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

Tommy meets a few new faces, in varying degrees of friendliness.

Tommy hadn't made it three blocks away when someone stopped him. A guy in a green hoodie and a white flu mask with a smile on it waved at him, jogging over. He was older than Tommy, but certainly younger than Techno and Wil. Tommy vaguely recalled being told not to talk to him. "Hey! You're Phil's new foster, right?"

"I am, yeah. I was told to avoid you." The guy in the green hoodie laughed.

"I'm sure you were, Tech is still mad at me. I'm not gonna bother you, just a friendly warning. My name's Clay, you can call me Dream, though. Don't go turn down the next road, just pass it if you're exploring." His face scrunched up beneath the mask. "Honestly avoid the block altogether, if you plan on keeping your wallet and unbroken bones."

"Oh? Why's he mad at you? And why should I avoid the block? Who's even there?" Dream had fallen in step with him, but kept about four feet of distance between them, either so he'd have time to run if needed or so Tommy would, though it'd be hard to say which.

"It's just drug dealers, honestly. They'll either want you to buy or kick your ass for fun. Either way, not a good place for a kid." Dream shrugged. There are some shops the next block down, though, and the bridge and stuff is a bit down from that."

"I'm not a kid, but I'll keep it in mind. Thanks," Tommy rolled his eyes, shoving his hands in his pockets. "You didn't answer my first question, though."

“Oh, uh. He’s mad at me because I upset Wilbur. He’s right to be, honestly. Anyway, see you around, dude.” Tommy just nodded as Dream ducked through a yard and was gone.

He made it to the shops, seeing a bakery and a few small stores; a thrift shop, a music shop, and what looked like a general store with miscellaneous goods. Tommy was about to go into the music shop when he heard a screech, coming from across the road, followed by laughing. He turned to see two teenagers walking, and it looked like the tall one was the one who was yelling, because the shorter was nearly doubled over in laughter. The tall one must have noticed him staring because he made immediate eye contact with Tommy and quirked his head. He whispered something to the shorter one and then they were both staring at him. Tommy turned around and pushed open the door to the music shop, which was blasting some aggressive punk music. The guy behind the counter barely glanced at him as he walked past.

Tommy was flipping through vinyls when he heard the bell for the door go off and the guy at the counter started speaking.

“Nope. You two know the rules. You’re not allowed in here at the same time.” The two teenagers were in the doorway, looking for all the world like the cat who caught the canary.

“Oh cmon, Funds. It’s just us, you know we would never do anything when you were working.” The shorter one cajoled, holding his hands up as if in surrender.

“Tubbo, I say this with all of my heart. You are my dear friend, and I love you, but if you told me the sky was blue I would look outside to check. Get out of my store.”

“Fundyy, my brother, my favorite guy, my pal, please let us acquire what we came in for and I will be sure to stay out of trouble.” The clerk- Fundy- groaned.

“What could you possibly need? You don’t even listen to vinyl.”

“Oh, we want to kidnap the blonde dude who just came in.” The tall one shrugged.

“Ranboo! You aren’t supposed to tell people, that’s how it becomes premeditated!” Tubbo groaned.

“Does the blonde dude know you two, or should he be scared?”

“He should be scared!” Tubbo said with a bounce and a smile, “He’s new!” Fundy sighed, waving a hand as if to say ‘do as you will’ and went back to texting.

“Uh, I don’t think I’m cool with being kidnapped, actually,” Tommy said, deadpan. “No offense.” Tubbo bounced over, grin not faltering at all.

“I wasn’t asking! I’m Tubbo! That’s Ranboo, and we are going to show you around because you’re living with Phil, which means you’re *new*,”

“Phil bring in lots of new people?” Tommy asked with an eyebrow raise.

“Nope! But he does always bring interesting ones, and this town is so, so boring.” Tubbo grabbed Tommy’s wrist, pulling him toward the front of the store. “And we really hate being bored.” Tommy figured this would be fine, so he followed the two out of the store and into the town at large.

—

It was not fine, these two were insane. Tommy had been dragged around for hours, Tubbo talking the whole time, though Tommy couldn’t tell you what about if he tried. “- anyway, then your brother launched a bottle rocket at me and that was miserable, and-“

“Wait, what? I don’t have a brother.” Tommy cut in, incredulous.

“Technoblade! He didn’t know it was me, probably, but he totally shot it on purpose.” Tubbo grinned at him.

“Technoblade is not my brother. He’s a stranger who I’m currently living with.” Tommy snorted. “And honestly it sounds like you deserved it a little.”

“Oh I mean I probably did. He felt bad about it though. And anyway, weren’t you adopted by Phil? That makes him your brother.”

“I’m being fostered by Phil, they’re different.” Tommy shook his head. “I’m not going to be adopted.” Tubbo deflated, just barely, at that.

“Why not? Phil’s cool.”

“I’m 17. You don’t get adopted at 17, you just age out of the system and skip town.” Tommy laughed a little bitterly. “Adoption takes a long time and the family actually has to like you.”

“Oh, do they not like you then?” Ranboo asked, looking genuinely curious.

“They don’t know me yet, but they won’t, no. I’m a ‘ *problem child* ’ apparently,” Tommy snorted.

“Oh, me too!” Tubbo said, bouncing on his toes.

“Same, but I think it’s just because I associate with him.” Ranboo pointed at Tubbo with a shrug. Tommy barked out a laugh.

“I’d say it’s a different problem, big man.” Tubbo nodded solemnly.

“Yeah, you don’t look like the arson type.” Ranboo threw his hands in the air in exasperation.

“I didn’t burn it down! I was framed!” Tubbo let out another peal of laughter, leaning on Tommy to keep himself from falling over.

“I don’t even want to know.” Tommy shook his head, but he did crack a smile.

“I’m sure you’ll hear the story eventually. Do you go to school here in town, or are you doing online?”

“The one here in town, yeah. I don’t start until Wednesday, though.”

“Cool! We both go there too!” Tubbo nodded, looking excited.

“Damn, I was hoping to ditch you and never have to speak to you again,” Tommy replied sarcastically. They turned another corner and Tubbo jolted to a stop, staring at someone down the street aways.

“Uh- maybe let’s go the other way, actually.” He muttered. Ranboo nodded, pulling them both back towards the corner, but the guy must have seen them, because he yelled,

“Tubbo? Is that you?” Tubbo tensed up, tucking himself behind Ranboo and looking pale as the guy approached. “Now I *know* you aren’t *hiding* from me Tubbo,” Tommy glanced at Tubbo and back at the man who was now only a few feet away.

“N-no, Schlatt. Just showing Tommy around. He’s Wilbur and Technoblade’s foster brother.” Schlatt took a step forward with a grin that radiated hidden anger.

“I’m gonna need you to take a step back, buddy.” Tommy cut in, standing in front of the others and putting as many obstacles between Schlatt and Tubbo as possible. “It doesn’t seem like he’s real keen to talk to you.”

“Tommy, was it? I’m only going to tell you once to mind your business, and after that, I’m going to make you.” Tommy nearly laughed. The guy was older, certainly, but Tommy was taller and sure he could take the guy in a fight if need be.

“I’d sure like to see you try, Schlatt.” The older man’s face twisted into what was almost a smirk.

“Brave talk from a guy who doesn’t know who I am.”

“I couldn’t fuckin care less who you are, dude. I’m telling you to piss off.” Tubbo reached a hand out and grabbed Tommy.

“Let’s just go, okay? None of us want any trouble.”

“Looks to me like Blondie here sure wants some trouble. Tell me, kid, you brave or just stupid?” Tommy rolled his eyes and shrugged.

“Far as I can tell, those are the same thing, but either way it still ends with me kicking your ass if you don’t take a step back.” Schlatt actually laughed at that.

“Oh, I like you. Alright, I’ll go. We can continue this conversation later, Tubs.” And with that, he turned on his heel and strolled back down the street.

“He.. left.” Ranboo looked at Tommy like he’d performed a miracle. “How did you do that?” Tommy just shrugged.

“Dude looks like a pussy to me. You good, Big T?” Tubbo was still pale, but he nodded.

“I’m... fine. Can we go somewhere else?” Tommy checked his phone.



“I actually should probably be heading back to Phil’s place. They want me back before 6:30, and it’s like 5:30 now.” Ranboo jumped at that.

“It’s that late? Oh my goodness Eret is going to kill you Tubbo, didn’t you tell them you’d be back by 5?” Tubbo laughed

“I texted them to tell them I’d be late, don’t worry. But yeah, Tommy, we can head back that way. I live pretty close to you, we can cut across the bridge and be back on your street by 6.”

“Sounds good to me.”

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Summary

Tommy thinks he's finally figured out what's expected of him.

Tommy got inside the house to the smells of Italian food and the sounds of quiet arguing. The members of the house didn't seem to hear him enter.

"The dude just turned off, that's fucking weird. Dream said he spoke to him this afternoon and told him to avoid Schlatt's block and the kid didn't even bat an eye." That was Techno. Who had apparently spoken to Dream, who he was mad at. Tommy couldn't help but roll his eyes.

"It's probably a fuckin, trauma response or something, I don't know!" Tommy heard a phone buzz, and Wilbur laughed a bit manically, "He also apparently *threatened to kick Schlatt's ass* today , so Schlatt loves him. Who the hell *is* this kid?"

"Do.. do you remember our History class with Mrs. Bolock?" Techno asked, his voice a little contemplative. "We watched that documentary on child soldiers?" Tommy heard Wilbur hum, apparently in agreement, because Techno continued, "Didn't he look just like them when he was checking you for a concussion? Like he'd seen hell, fought on the front lines, and never quite made it home? It was... I don't want to say intimidating, because well, I'm me, but it sure was something."

"You won't say it, but I will. It *was* intimidating. I've never in my life been so compelled to take orders from a kid, but honestly? I wouldn't have argued with him on anything, Tech. He looked scary."

"Do you think he's dangerous?" Techno asked, his voice still that somber, even tone.

“Not to you two,” Tommy spoke up, stepping into the doorway. Both brothers whipped around in unison, twin faces of embarrassment on their faces. “I’m not going to apologize for eavesdropping when you were literally talking about me, but I can answer your question. I’m not going to do anything to you unless it becomes a necessity. I don’t hurt people for fun.” Technoblade nodded at that and turned back to the stove, but Wilbur furrowed his brow.

“But you’ve hurt people?”

“Course I have. I’m a seventeen-year-old foster kid. The foster system is shit. People take in kids they don’t want for the check, or take in kids who don’t want to be there who act out, and there’s always someone who needs protection,” Tommy shrugged. “There’s bound to be a few situations where you can’t just bite your tongue and watch it happen, where you have to step in and make sure some nine-year-old isn’t going to get his teeth kicked in for saying the wrong thing.”

“And what? You’re the hero?” Techno scoffed, turning to look at him again. “How has that worked out for you?”

“Well, nowadays, it usually ends with me needing a new house and an asshole needing to have their nose set, but it tends to vary day to day.” Tommy shrugged. “But I don’t mind that much.”

“A right and proper Theseus, aren’t you?” Techno laughed bitterly. Tommy didn’t mention that he didn’t know who Theseus was, and Techno didn’t seem to want to elaborate. “Dinner is ready. Can you tell Dad? He’s in his office.”

Tommy shrugged and headed upstairs. He stood in the doorway of the office for a moment. The door was open and Phil looked miserable, his left hand on his forehead and his right typing aggressively. Tommy tapped the door with his knuckles twice to alert Phil of his presence before speaking, “Technoblade says food is ready.”

“Oh, is it already time for Lunch?” Phil asked, looking up.

“Uh, no, Dinner. It’s like, 6 pm,” Tommy replied, incredulous. “Have you not moved since this morning?”

“Oh. Oh! God, how did it get so late?” Phil shuffled some papers on his desk and looked back at Tommy, as if he was just seeing him for the first time. “I’m sorry, I was caught up in some stuff for work and didn’t- how was your day? Did you spend it with Techno? Is Wil okay? God, I can’t believe I just-“ Tommy cut him off,

“Wil looks fine, he’s downstairs, no homework insight. I went out today, met a few people. It was fine. Go eat.” Phil let out a deep breath and smiled tightly

“Of course, let’s go.”

“Oh, I didn’t- uh,” Tommy wondered if he was supposed to mention the punishment. Some families didn’t like that. He figured it was a good time to find out while Phil’s guard was still down. “I haven’t been here today to do anything.” Tommy assumed the ‘to earn back food’ went unsaid, but Phil looked confused.

“I don’t think I understand, what does that mean? Have you already eaten?” Tommy scowled. Was that a trick question?

“I didn’t eat when I was out, no. But I only just got here a few minutes ago.” Somehow Phil looked *more* confused at that.

“I’m sorry, I’m still a little lost. Do you need... time to change or something, beforehand?”

“What? No. I’m saying I haven’t done anything yet to make up for last night, so I won’t be eating.” Tommy spoke slowly, but in his mind, his thoughts were racing, trying to figure out what the correct course of action was here. Maybe Phil wanted him to explain what he should do to make up for it. “I can clean up a bit up here and do the dishes after, if that works. I can start now or stay at the table while you eat and clean after.” Phil’s confusion hadn’t seemed to wane, to Tommy’s annoyance. “Or if there’s something else, you need only ask. I’m not sure what needs to be done.”

“What does that-,” Phil’s question was cut off by Wil, who stuck his head into the stairway.

“What’s taking so long? Come here.” Phil glanced between Tommy and Wil, before slumping a little and nodded, gesturing for Tommy to go first. Tommy walked stiffly into the dining room, waiting for the others to sit before taking an empty seat. When Wilbur tried to serve him a portion, Tommy shook his head, holding a hand up to signal him to stop. “Are you not hungry?” Wilbur asked softly, looking at him with concern.

“I can’t eat yet,” Tommy replied blandly. “I was out all day.”

“Wouldn’t walking around all day make you more inclined to eat?” Techno asked, now scrutinizing Tommy. “It’s not poisoned, or anything.” Tommy could feel himself getting frustrated again.

“I was *out* all day. I wasn’t here to do anything to make up for last night.” Tommy repeated.

“Did something happen last night?” And suddenly Tommy realized what was going on. They *didn’t* want him to bring it up. Like how Wil and Techno and Phil all moved past the fight, he was expected to do the same. He had dealt with a family like this once, where he just had to make it up to them and they would make it obvious when he was forgiven. That must be why Wil and Techno made dinner, to make it up to Phil.

“No, no. Sorry, I’m not really sure what I meant. I’m not hungry, no.” Tommy out on his best smile, jokingly shaking his head as if he was confused at himself too. “I guess I’m just a bit tired. Y’know, from walking around today.” He visibly relaxed when everyone settled back down, even if they all looked slightly put-off.

“I.. guess if you aren’t hungry you don’t have to stay down here?” Phil said, though it was obviously a question towards his sons, who both shrugged. “If you want to go upstairs you can. Or to the living room.” Tommy beamed again, making sure it looked realistic, and frankly, it was a bit genuine. He hated not knowing the dynamic of a new house, and he was quite pleased that he had figured this one out so quickly. He stood, nodding his thanks, and headed to the living room. The place was mostly clean, so Tommy just straightened up the pillows and threw away the empty soda cans on the coffee table, scrunching his nose up a bit.

Clearly, Wilbur and Techno spent more time in there than Phil. He couldn't imagine the man would be pleased with them leaving trash out had he noticed, so he made a mental note to mention it to them when he got the chance.

Once the living room was tidy, he found the cleaning supplies and cleaned both the downs and upstairs bathrooms, as well as dusting and straightening up the study. He left Phil's office untouched since it seemed to be a private room much like the bedrooms. He could hear the sound of dishes being washed downstairs, and Techno and Wilbur's voices from the kitchen. It was too low for him to hear what they were saying, but he assumed they were discussing what else they could do beyond cleaning to help alleviate whatever punishment they'd received.

Tommy went back to the room he was staying in once he had finished, not wanting to clean too much and risk leaving nothing for the older two to do. He straightened up the room a bit, though it wasn't particularly disorderly in the first place, watered the plant on the desk, and played on his phone until it was time to sleep.

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He would have fallen asleep, too, had it not been for Wilbur being aggressively loud as he climbed onto the roof. Tommy groaned a bit and stuck his head out the window. "You would make the worst burglar in existence." He hissed under his breath. "Go to fucking sleep." Wilbur grinned at him, all teeth and mischief.

"Did you really threaten a grown man and known drug dealer today over Tubbo Smith?"

"Who, Schlatt? I didn't know he was a drug dealer, but yeah, I guess I did." Tommy rested his elbows and sat his head in his hands. "He a friend of yours, then?"

"Oh, God no. We used to be friends in school, but we haven't been in years. He texted me today to let me know he was, and I quote, 'keeping you'." Wilbur snickered. "Dream texted Tech too, which is even *more* bizarre, because they haven't spoken in ages. Schlatt and I don't have bad blood or anything, we just grew apart, but the last time those two talked Tech broke Dream's arm."

“Schlatt can get bent, I’m not a fucking pet.” Tommy scoffed, then softened and glanced at Wilbur. “Dream said.. they weren’t talking because he did something to you.”

“Eh, that’s true, I guess. I don’t really mind much anymore, I never really liked the guy much, but I don’t have any bad feelings towards him either.”

“No? Then what happened?” Tommy saw the way Wilbur grimaced and backtracked, “You don’t have to say.”

“No, it’s fine. We uh.. we were at a party when I was 17, and Dream was 15. Not together, but both hanging around with the same group of people who were mostly my age or older, and Dream made a comment about how he never understood why some people were so loud when nobody wanted to hear them speak. It was directed at me, and I don’t actually think it was meant to be that malicious, but I was 17 and melodramatic, as teenagers are, so I bit.

I told him that I never understood why some people insisted on hanging around people when nobody wanted them around.” Wilbur grimaced again. “He.. said that it was awfully bold of me to be talking about not being wanted when my own parents hadn’t wanted me.” Tommy sucked in a sharp breath at that, and Wilbur smiled dryly at him. “Yeah, it uh, did *not* go over well, to say the least. Techno confronted him about it the next day and Dream was still mad, I guess, so he told Tech he stood by what he said. Techno pushed him, and Dream hit the ground pretty hard, but it would have been fine if they weren’t literally right next to a staircase. Dream apparently jumped back when Techno moved towards him and went tumbling down like 80 stairs. He’s lucky he didn’t break his neck.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tommy muttered, taken aback.

“Dream apologized to me like a week later, and told me he wasn’t mad about his arm, but Techno holds a grudge like you wouldn’t believe.” Wil took a drag from a cigarette Tommy didn’t even see him light. “So they don’t talk. It’s been years and I’ve only seen them exchange maybe ten words, even though we live two houses apart.” Wilbur pointed at a white one-story house just past the intersection.

“Not gonna lie, I think I’m on Techno’s side with this,” Tommy replied. “I don’t care how young he was, there’s a line.” Wilbur shrugged and went back to smoking. “Those things are

awful for you, you know. They'll kill you. And if they don't, climbing on this shoddy ass roof will.

"Yeah, yeah. I've been told." Wilbur shrugged. "I'm not too concerned about it. Y'know what I am concerned about, though? You. Tech said you cleaned the whole house while we were eating."

"I left the kitchen, bedrooms, office, downstairs study, and laundry alone," Tommy reassured. "Oh, by the way, I don't know which of you did it but there were cans on the table in the living room. Phil mentioned he didn't like food being left out, so I thought I'd remind you."

"Oh, yeah, those were mine. Thanks," Wilbur smiled. "You didn't need to clean everything though, Tech and I would have gotten it, or Phil would. You've only been here for like two days, we'll go easy on you for at least a little while before you're going to be expected to clean anything besides your own mess, and even then you don't have to clean up *our* messes." Wilbur didn't seem angry, though Tommy felt like there was still something off about the way he was talking.

"Oh, you know. Just doing what has to be done." Tommy replied.

"...right," Wilbur replied softly. "Get some sleep, Tommy."

"You too. Actual sleep, not just pretending to sleep then studying until you have a breakdown at the table." Tommy replied, giving Wilbur a faux-stern look.

"Sir yes sir." Wilbur half-heartedly saluted and pulled himself inside. Tommy grinned and went back to his bed, feeling much better about his relationship with Wilbur at least. It was good to know someone was on his side, even if only because they had a mutual desire to not piss Phil off.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

Wilbur and Techno see Tommy in a different light.

Day Three was met with Tommy politely declining breakfast, and instead taking out the trash and sweeping the floors. Phil told him he didn't need to do that, but Tommy smiled bitterly and assured him he wanted to. Tommy managed to miss the quiet way Techno told Phil that Tommy still hadn't eaten, and pointedly ignored the glances the two kept throwing his way. Wilbur came down much later, at nearly 11, and also declined breakfast, opting for a cup of tea and a protein bar. Once Tommy had finished sweeping, he went back through the house and straightened up anything out of place, folding the blanket that was kept on the couch and realigning the pillows. He could feel the hunger starting to get to him, feeling light-headed and more shaky than usual. He had gone much longer without eating, but the 11 months with Margaret had gotten him far too used to three meals a day.

Once he decided that the house was tidy enough, he went upstairs, taking a book from the bookshelf in the study and curling up in one of the two armchairs in there to read. Around 1, Technoblade approached him.

"I'm making lunch," He said gruffly. Tommy tucked a slip of paper in the book he was reading and looked up at him with a small smile.

"That's nice of you, do you need help cooking? Or cleaning up?" Techno's face fell just very slightly.

"No, no, neither. I just... wanted to let you know." With that he left, looking as if someone has just told him bad news. Tommy went back to reading, not thinking much of the interaction. Around two Techno called up, "anyone who wants food should be at the table immediately." Tommy chuckled at the way the man managed to make cooking his family a meal sound like a threat, and didn't move. He had gotten pretty absorbed into the story, so when something slammed down onto the desk behind him, he jumped. Techno was there, mouth in a grim line. What he had aggressively sat down was a bowl of what seemed to be soup.

“Uh, do you want me to leave so you can be mad at your food in peace, or?” Tommy asked, a little bewildered.

“It’s for you. Eat it.” Techno all but demanded. Tommy felt himself relax just a bit. He must have sufficiently made up for the first dinner then.

“Thank you,” Tommy said earnestly, reaching out and taking the bowl. He took a bite and was pleased to find it tasted incredible. “Oh, this is great. Is this what you made for lunch, then?”

“Yes. I’m glad you like it. I’ll.. leave you to eat, then.” Tommy nodded gratefully and took another bite.

—

Techno nearly bolted from the room, barely controlling his pace until he made it out of Tommy’s line of sight. Both Phil and Wilbur were sitting in the dining room, looking anxious. When Tommy hadn’t come down for lunch, Phil nearly sobbed. Wilbur didn’t look far off. They’d all spoken about how concerned they were for the boy, whether for the way his emotions switched at the drop of the hat or the way he hadn’t eaten a bite since the rice that first night. When they saw Techno come down without the bowl, they both let out a grateful sigh.

“He took it no problem,” Techno relayed, looking confused. Didn’t even seem to hesitate much. Didn’t even ask what it *was* .” Phil looked bewildered at that, but Wilbur just relaxed more.

“Not an eating disorder then? Or not one as cut and dry as just not eating. Maybe it was just eating at the table with us?” Phil grimaced before replying.

“Maybe? I still wish I could figure out what he meant by ‘make up for last night’.”

“Me too. Maybe... maybe it was the rice? Maybe it was because we ordered out and he was worried he wasted food by not eating?” Wilbur suggested.

“But why not just eat it later, then? Why leave it in the fridge?” Techno argued. “We’re *missing* something, I know it. What else did he say, Dad?”

“Nothing. He said he’d been out, that he’d just gotten in, and then he said he hadn’t made up for last night. It felt like the whole conversation had gone crossways, like we weren’t speaking to each other at all.” Phil set his head in his hands. “I feel so out of my league. I don’t know how to deal with this.” Wilbur set a hand on Phil’s arm comfortingly.

“We’ll figure it out, Dad.”

—

When Tommy finished his soup, he headed downstairs to clean the bowl and was met with the sight of Phil next to tears being comforted, poorly, by his sons.

“Is everything.. okay?” Tommy asked softly. “Did something happen?” Phil shot up and looked at Tommy, his face melting into an easy smile, almost no trace of the exhaustion and sorrow to be found.

“Yep, we’re all good here. Just chatting,” Phil lied poorly. Techno deadpanned at his father.

“You’re about as smooth as gravel, old man.” Tommy chuckled at that. Tech didn’t seem worried so Tommy decided on not pushing the topic, and instead slipped through the room and into the kitchen to wash up. He ignored the way his heart rate picked up at being around all three of them. He hadn’t done anything to warrant another punishment so soon, so he was confident that the weird happy persona of Phil’s, which he had mistakenly assumed was genuine originally, would stick around for a bit. He heard Wilbur enter, his steps unmistakable, light and just slightly uneven, but didn’t turn around. Wilbur didn’t say anything, so Tommy decided to speak up.

“Do you need something, Wilbur?” He heard the man splutter a bit.

“How did you know it was me? How did you know I was even there?” Tommy huffed out a laugh

“World’s worst burglar, remember?” Wilbur giggled and stepped forward to take the newly clean bowl and dry it for Tommy. “What do you need?”

“I wanted to see if you wanted to hang out with me and Tech today, actually. Dad’s got some work to do so we were gonna go hang out with a few friends.” Tommy shrugged and nodded.

“That sounds good, yeah. Let me change and I’ll be good to go whenever.”

Tommy met back at the door with Techno and Wilbur, Techno twirling a set of keys and smirking at something Wil was animatedly complaining about. When they saw him they both smiled and Techno opened the door, gesturing them out. They got into a beaten-down SUV and neither Techno nor Wilbur missed the way Tommy’s demeanor changed. He relaxed, joked with them, complained half-heartedly about the music, and replying easily when asked a question. It was like a new person, an actual teenager and not a shell.

By the time they had made it to their destination, a shopping mall, the car had lapsed into an almost comfortable silence. “We’re meeting with a few people, so don’t be afraid to let us know if you get overwhelmed or something,” Techno said, putting the car in park.

“Will do. Anything I should know?” Tommy asked, getting out of the car.

“Uh, Eret uses they/them pronouns, and Fundy uses he/him. If Purpled is there, he’s your age, don’t sneak up behind him unless you want to get hit, he’s a little jumpy. Otherwise, I don’t think so?”

“They/them pronouns?” Tommy asked, a little confused, but Wil and Techno both glared at him.

“Is that going to be a problem?” Techno asked, a little aggressively, and Tommy faltered before replying,

“I.. maybe? I don’t know how to use those.” Both of them immediately relaxed, and Wil looked apologetic.

“Sorry, we maybe shouldn’t have assumed the worst there. You use them just like she or he. Like.. ‘They went to the store, they are very tall, this is their drink, I am friends with them’. Do you understand?” Tommy lit up and nodded.

“Yes, that makes sense. Thank you!” The other two smiled at him and they headed towards a group of people. Tommy could see Ranboo and Tubbo there, as well as another tall person in a dress, a short person with pink hair, and a handful of people who were all pretty casually leaning on each other and talking.

“Tommmmmmyyyy!” Tubbo grinned, waving. Tommy laughed a little.

“Tubbbbooooo!” Tommy slung an arm around the shorter boy’s shoulders. Tubbo fairly beamed at him. “How are you today? And Ranboob, my friend, how are you? ”

“I’m good! You seem in a better mood today!”

“It’s Ranboo, and I hate you.” They replied at the same time.

“I stand by what I said. And I am, yeah. I just ate, so I’m feeling pretty good, my man.” Tommy was too busy laughing at Ranboo’s attempt to use them both as an armrest to see Wilbur frown at that.

“I’m Niki! She/her.” The small girl with pink hair said to Tommy, smiling. Karl, Sapnap, Bad, Quackity, and Sam all did the same, introducing themselves with their names (or in most cases, nicknames) and pronouns.

“I’m Eret, I use they/them pronouns,” Eret said, a little anxiously. They were tall, with a very deep voice, and they were wearing a soft yellow dress that puffed out at the bottom.

“I’m Tommy, He/him. I like your dress.” Eret beamed.

“Thank you! Tubbo said you two met yesterday, right?” Tommy agreed, easily falling into the group’s dynamic. They went through a couple of stores, Tommy buying a small Bee plush that Tubbo had been looking at and slipping in the smaller boy’s hoodie pocket when he wasn’t looking, throwing a wink to Wilbur, who had seen him buy it and was curious as to what he was doing. When they made it to the arcade, Tommy howled with laughter and went out of his way to playfully distract Wilbur when he was against Techno in games, then turn around immediately to distract Techno against Wilbur.

“You’re a traitor, Tommy! You used me, let me think we were friends, then still sided with them!” Techno groaned after he lost in Air hockey against Eret for the fifth time, and Tommy laughed at him, a genuine, open laugh that felt like new beginnings to both Wilbur and Techno as the afternoon dragged on.

They were miserable to realize the happy, childish Tommy was not there to last. Tommy was in the backseat again, and he could feel his hands shaking more as they got back to the house. His energy from being around people drained back out until he was back calm, quiet Tommy. Techno must have noticed the way he got quieter and quieter, eventually entirely going from loud and playful to sullen and serious, because he was glancing in the rearview mirror at him over and over. By the time they got out of the car, it was as if they’d never left. They couldn’t even see traces of the tiredness that the kid had been showing for the last hour or so. He looked perfectly blank, even when he smiled as he held the door open it felt wrong because they had seen him genuinely smile just an hour before and it looked nothing the same.

Phil met them in the dining room, he was sitting at the table with a laptop in front of him, a pot sitting in the middle of the table and steaming.

“How was your day, boys? I reheated the pasta from dinner last night, I hope that works for you.” Wilbur and Techno nodded and Tommy pretended he didn’t hear the question so he didn’t need to answer. “Tommy? Will you be eating with us?” Phil asked, his voice has something in it, but Tommy couldn’t place what, so he just shrugged and nodded.

“O’ Course. Haven’t eaten since lunch and I feel like I burned about a million calories trying to keep up with Wil and his long ass legs.” Tommy joked, but Wilbur and Techno could tell it was off, nothing like the nearly feral way he picked and teased and joked with everyone all afternoon. Phil, who had not seen Tommy in any other way, smiled and joked back.

“Sounds about right. He’s like those dogs who still think they’re lapdogs even when they’re massive, he still thinks he has the legs of a person and not a giraffe.” Tommy let out a quiet laugh, nothing like his howls of laughter in the arcade, but if Phil noticed anything off, he didn’t mention it. The meal went quickly, and Tommy offered to wash the dishes once everyone was finished, but Techno waved him off, saying he would do it, so Tommy agreed and headed upstairs to shower and lay in bed until Wilbur inevitably woke him up.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Summary

Tommy gets stuck in his head on his first day alone in the house.

## Chapter Notes

Warning- From the time break until almost the end of the chapter, there are explicit descriptions of a panic attack, mild unintentional self-injury, and mentions of previous abuse. I will give a chapter summary for this chapter in the beginning notes of the next chapter for anyone who wants to skip that.

Stay safe kiddos.

Wilbur didn't wake him up, because Wilbur never made it to his bedroom that night, which Tommy could tell because when he woke with a start at 2:45 AM and went to get some water, Wilbur was at the kitchen table again, surrounded by homework, and he was crying.

"Wil, man, you can't keep doing this." Tommy chastised lightly. "What the hell are you working on?"

"It's English work, I have an essay due tomorrow at 10 about a story and I don't understand it," Wil muttered. "I'll be fine, go back to sleep."

"Phil will be awake in an hour and 15 minutes, Wilbur. I'm not going back to sleep," Tommy grimaced. "What's the book?"

"It's the Iliad," Wilbur replied, and Tommy looked at him incredulously



“You realize who your brother is, right? He’s literally referenced Greek mythology like eight times this weekend.”

“Yes, I know, Techno is a fucking genius and incredible at English and I should be able to get this but I *don’t*,” Wilbur nearly sobbed out. Tommy flinched at the way Wilbur slammed his head into the table.

“Don’t do that. And... That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying you have a walking, talking ‘Greek Mythology to English’ dictionary two doors down from where you’re sitting. Just ask him to help.”

“He’s asleep,” Wilbur replied, still staring at his pages.

“He’s not. Be quiet for a second, listen.” When Wilbur did, he could hear it- quiet pacing and grumbling, coming from Technoblade’s bedroom. “He’s definitely awake. Just go ask him if he can help you.”

“I don’t want to bother him,” Wilbur replied, writing something down.

“Oh for God’s sake,” Tommy stood, marching over to Techno’s door and lightly knocking. When Techno answered, fully dressed but hair disheveled, Tommy gave him a dry look. “You need to get more sleep, dude. But, one problem at a time. Wilbur doesn’t understand the Iliad because nobody does, except for you. Will you please help him with his work before Phil comes down here and we have another book incident?” Technoblade looked totally bewildered and nodded, following him back to the table. “Look, I bothered him for you. Now get this done and sleep, for the love of fuck . ”

Tommy left the brothers at the table, staring at each other, and got himself a glass of water. He poured one for Wilbur and Techno too, setting them next to each of them but avoiding the papers piled everywhere as he passed and headed back to the bedroom. He played on his phone for about twenty minutes before he heard Wilbur go back into his room, and immediately Tommy heard him clamor onto the roof. When he stuck his head out the window, he expected Wilbur to be smoking, but both Wilbur and Technoblade were sitting there, looking up at the stars.

“Oh, hey. Sorry, I always forget you can hear me.” Wilbur mumbled. Techno raised an eyebrow.

“Always, eh? How often you out on the roof?”

“Bite me.” Wilbur snapped back halfheartedly.

“Did you get the paper done?” Tommy asked them, and Wil nodded, looking embarrassed.

“Yeah. It only took ten minutes.”

“Good! Now go to fucking sleep, you have a class in like, a few hours.”

“Tech didn’t sleep either!” Wilbur argued.

“I was talking to both of you,” Tommy deadpanned and laughed at the offended look on Techno’s face. “Goodnight.” Tommy stuck his head back inside but left the window open, hearing Wilbur’s signature scuffling, and very faintly hearing Technoblade crawl in too, though it was much softer. He shook his head and stuck his earbuds in, drowning out the silence of the house with quiet music.

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The 4th morning brought with it the chaos that was an average weekday. Wilbur sprinting through the house to make it to his 6 am lab time, Phil on the phone arguing with someone he worked with, and Techno casually watching it all go down with a cup of coffee at the dining table. Wilbur left first, and an hour later Techno left too, and then it was just Phil and Tommy in the house.

Phil argued on the phone for another 20 minutes after Techno left before Tommy heard him slam his phone on the desk and swear. He came storming downstairs and through the living

room, grabbing something off the back of the couch and turning, as if to head into the kitchen when he saw Tommy frozen in place, staring at him.

“Shit, sorry mate, I completely forgot you were here. I have to go into the office to fix an issue, are you going to be good to be here alone? Just for a few hours, Wil’s last class is at 3, so he’s home by 4:30, 5 at the latest.”

Tommy took a second to get his breath back from the panic at seeing Phil mad, but he did manage a very even, “Yeah, I’ll be fine, go ahead.” Phil looked grateful for that, not apparently noticing the way Tommy was gripping the table to keep himself from collapsing in tears. Phil left very quickly after, and Tommy just barely made it to the room he was staying in before he hit his knees, gasping for air and trying to slow his racing heart. He was shaking, tears pricking in his eyes.

It had been years since an adult’s anger had made Tommy react like this, but when Phil had turned around, the look in his eyes, all hate and fire, Tommy very nearly shut down. Now he couldn’t get the flashing memories of other angry people, of fists coming toward him, of doors slammed in his face, of the taste of gravel when it flies up to meet his teeth after he says the wrong thing. He can only hear the angry voices, voices just like Phil’s, telling him he was worthless, that he was bad, inconsiderate, annoying, that he was too loud, too aggressive, too stupid to understand. He was *too much* .

Then there was a hand on his shoulder, and he jerked back away from it, because he was back in the moment and the moment had Technoblade kneeling on the floor with his hands outreached toward Tommy, looking horrified. Tommy still couldn’t hear, his heart pounding and blood rushing in his ears. He could see, though, through the tears, that Technoblade was talking. He tried to pull himself back, but he couldn’t get his hands to tap the way he heeded them to. In his panic he didn’t see Techno reach forward again, taking Tommy’s hands. Tommy could only barely feel them, all tingling and half asleep as they were, but when he looked down he was a little shocked to see blood on them, half-dried under his nails, running down his arms. Techno was tapping, the same 4-7-8 pattern Tommy had attempted before, and Tommy tried his best to follow it, even though it took him nearly three times as long before it worked.

When his hearing returned, he could hear Techno humming, his own breath a little shaky. Tommy croaked out, “you okay?” Before Techno wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug. He pulled back after a second, looking at Tommy carefully.

“I’m fine, Toms. What *happened*? ” Tommy flushed red at the distraught look on the man’s face, as well as the nickname, but Techno continued, “Dream called me, completely freaking out because he could hear you, but the doors were all locked. I think if I were any further away he would have climbed in through the window himself.” Techno laughed, though it sounded closer to a sob. “Jesus Christ, it sounded like you were dying, and when I got here you weren’t responding at all. You didn’t even notice me pulling your nails out of your fucking arms.”

“I- what.. time is it?” Tommy asked instead of answering the question.

“It’s... I don’t know, 2? 2:30? Why? What *happened*, Tommy?”

“You aren’t... you have class right now. You’re supposed to be in class. Wil will be here at 4:30, but he didn’t mention you so you must have class later.” Tommy mumbled, still mostly out of it.

“Tommy I couldn’t care less about the classes. Please tell me what happened to cause this. Where’s Dad?”

“I...he went to work? I don’t know. Phil was angry, he slammed a phone and was yelling, and there wasn’t... there wasn’t anyone there that I needed to keep away from him so I couldn’t... I couldn’t focus? Then he left and then... then you were here? But it’s been hours, hours since he left. I’m still... still, I can’t,” Tommy’s breathing hitched, and Techno started tapping again, pulling Tommy back into the moment. “I’m sorry, I’m trying.” Tommy croaked out, voice very small, very apologetic.

“So Phil scared you? Can you tell me exactly what about him scared you?” Tommy startled at Techno calling his dad by his name but slowly nodded.

“He.. he was coming through the house, and he was so *mad* , and, and he turned to look at me and for a second he was just glaring at me and it shouldn’t have scared me, but he’s... Phil is scary when he’s mad.” Tommy mumbled.

“Yeah, yeah he is.” Techno agreed. “Here, let go clean up your arms, okay? I’ll make you something to eat and we can stay downstairs until Wil gets home. You’re safe, nobody is going to hurt you, and it’s going to be okay.” Techno helped him up, walking with him to the bathroom where they wiped away the blood to reveal four slightly gorey looking semicircular wounds. “Fuck, those look gnarly.” Techno winced.

“I.. can’t even feel them,” Tommy admitted softly.

“That’s both terrifying and probably a good thing. It’s the adrenaline, though. When that wears off those are going to sting like a bastard.” Techno explained, sticking bandages to them and taping them to his arm. “Wash your hand for me, okay?”

Tommy did, scrubbing his nails until the water stopped running that awful pink-orange color, and then followed Techno into the kitchen, where he was promptly given a chair and told to sit and stay while Techno cooked. It was nice, it felt very relaxed and would have been pleasant, even, if it weren’t for the circumstances.

If it weren’t for the fact that Tommy’s whole body still felt like jello, and that his pulse was still pounding, it could have been two friends hanging out. Techno was explaining what he was doing as he cooked, talking about food safety and the proper way to cut things, and Tommy listened, fascinated by the calm, even tone of his voice and the wealth of information on the topic.

“You know a lot about cooking,” Tommy said, once Techno has quieted down for a second.

“My foster parents before Phil were chefs. They were great, they taught me a lot about cooking when I was really young, and a lot of it stuck.”

“What happened, then? Why were you placed with Phil?”

“Their restaurant burned down, and they were out of work for a while. They were barely making ends meet and didn’t want me to live in poverty with them, so they gave me up. I still speak to them occasionally, and visit their restaurant in the city whenever I get the chance. They adopted a set of twins a few years ago that are absolute monsters, barely out of diapers

and just the worst kids you'll ever meet." Techno said this with a very, very fond smile. "You might meet the kids at some point, I occasionally babysit them." Tommy laughed at that.

"You? Babysitting?"

"I.. yeah. I don't really like kids much, but they're sort of like family, so I don't mind. Plus there's nothing more satisfying than sending two toddlers home hopped up on sugar to their parents." Techno smirked, glancing at Tommy, who laughed quietly at that. They lapsed back into silence, Technoblade finishing cooking and carrying the two bowls of rice, chicken, and vegetables out to the living room while gesturing for Tommy to follow. He did, taking his bowl and curling up on one end of the sofa, while Techno sat on the other end, pretending to focus on his meal but instead keeping a sharp eye trained on Tommy, making sure he wasn't going to panic again. He shot off a text to Wilbur to tell him to come straight home after class and texted Dream to let him know Tommy was fine, only to groan immediately when Dream called him. "What." He snapped into the phone, and he could practically hear the eye roll of his ex-best friend.

*"Don't be a bitch. I have every right to be concerned when I hear a child screaming bloody murder in your fucking house."*

"He's fine, I just told you that. It was the entire text message. Have you forgotten how to read since you graduated?" Tommy looked at Techno with a confused smile. "It's Dream. He's calling to be nosy."

*"I just wanted to make sure the kid was okay! Christ. I figured if I texted I'd get distracted and never reply or something."*

"He's fine, Dream. Take your fucking meds, and stop bothering us."

*"Oh, shit, you're right, I haven't taken them. Thank you."* Techno could hear the pill bottle open but not any water.

"Don't fucking take them dry, go get water! What is wrong with you?" And Tommy could hear Dream laugh through the phone.

“*Okay, mom. I’ll do that. Text me if you need me to kick someone’s ass.*”

“Nothing happened, he’s fine. Fuck off.” Techno groaned and hung up the phone. “Good lord, he’s irritating.”

“You still care about him, though.” Tommy hummed.

“No, I don’t.”

“You yelled at him for missing his meds.”

“He always forgets,” Techno mumbled, staring into his bowl. “I’m mad at him, and I don’t want to forgive him, but I don’t want him to end up hurt because he forgot to eat or sleep then tried to go do some parkour shit and fell off a roof.”

“Fair enough.” Tommy shrugged. “How did he know something was wrong, anyway?”

“Wha- Tommy, you were *screaming*. I could hear it from the driveway with the car still running, I can’t believe nobody called the *cops* it was so loud. You were begging someone to forgive you, apologizing and freaking out. It was... horrific to *watch*, I can’t even imagine what the hell was going on in your head.” Tommy started at that.

“I was screaming?”

“What? Yes. Why do you think your voice is like that?” Techno asked softly. Tommy just shrugged.

“I.. tell him I’m sorry for worrying him. I’m sorry for worrying you, too.”

“Jesus. You don’t need to apologize, Tommy. Nobody is mad at you for getting triggered by something.” Tommy’s nose scrunched up in discomfort at that. “Trigger isn’t a dirty word, don’t be like that. Literally, everyone who has ever experienced trauma has triggers.”

“I haven’t experienced *trauma*. I’m fine, I was just being stupid. Phil wasn’t even mad at me.” Tommy argued, and Techno flinched uncomfortably at the statement. He hadn’t bounced back as cleanly as he had that first time, but Techno could see it- the way his brain was crudely stitching itself back together, the way he was getting more and more calm and normal, the way his laugh didn’t even sound forced when he called himself stupid for being scared. It was nauseating, and Techno wanted to hug the kid, but instead, he just took the empty dishes and stood up.

“Right... uh, I’m gonna go wash these bowls, okay? I’ll be back in a minute,” and he fled the room to hide the tears that were threatening to spill. All he could think was ‘ *what the hell happened to this kid?* ’



# Chapter 9

## Chapter Summary

The aftermath of panic shouldn't be so calm.

## Chapter Notes

Summary of the last chapter for anyone who didn't read it!

Phil was angry because work called him into the office, and scared Tommy. Tommy got caught up in flashbacks from previous homes and Techno pulled him out of it, but seeing Tommy so scared really freaked him out.

Wilbur came home to Tommy curled up on the couch, which was unusual, but otherwise looking totally normal. He briefly wondered why Techno had been insistent on him being home early before Techno himself rounded the corner and Tommy spoke up.

“Hi, Wilbur,” Tommy croaked out, his voice sounding terrible. Techno was frowning at the teenager, obviously worried but trying not to hover. Wilbur had no such qualms.

“Oh, bud, you sound terrible. Are you getting sick?” He moved forward to place a hand on Tommy’s forehead but was stopped by Tech, who grabbed his shoulder, just barely shaking his head.

“Jesus, are you both mother hens? I’m fine. Techno won’t even let me leave the couch! I’m not even sick, I just strained my voice this morning,” Tommy complained, sinking down further into the cushions.

“What happened?” He asked his brother, who winced and looked at Tommy.

“Do you want me to tell him? We can go into the other room.” Techno offered, and Tommy shrugged impassively. “Okay. C’mon, Wil.”

When they made it to the kitchen Techno slumped against the counter, looking for all the world like he was going to cry. Wilbur had only seen Techno cry twice in the entire time he’d known him, so naturally, he panicked, moving forward to take his hands, but Techno just shook him off.

“Do.. do you remember much of being in the system? Before Dad?” Techno asked softly.

“Yeah, of course, I do. Why?”

“Think about the bad houses you stayed in, what were they like?” Wilbur stiffened at that, confused.

“I... don’t know? There was the one with like, 8 of us piled in a three-bedroom house that was miserable, none of us ever really got a lot to eat there... there was the one where the dad was a drunk, but I got pulled from there pretty quick. And I mean, we were both in that house with the older girl who would kick the shit out of us, but I was only there like six days, and you were only there for like five days more, right?”

“Yes. I was there for eleven days, and that’s what I considered my worst house. There were others, emotionally shitty ones, that fucked me up, but I’m in that same boat. We both see therapists and can’t stand social workers even though most of the homes we were in were fine.”

“What does this have to do with why Tommy can’t talk?”

“I don’t... don’t think Tommy had that experience,” Techno said. “I think he was in houses that meant he would have considered our worst houses his best. Dream call me this afternoon, said he could hear Tommy screaming. Said it sounded like he was begging for his life. Dream apparently tried to break in to help but we all keep the windows and doors locked and the only way in would have been Tommy’s window. I got home twenty minutes later and

he was *still* screaming, but there wasn't anything happening, he was having a fucking... flashback? Panic attack? I don't know. It was awful. The kid wasn't crying, or if he was it was just barely, but he was switching between hiding his face and clawing at his arms and he looked like a child, he looked so young it made me sick, and he was telling someone to take it out on him, to not hurt 'them', whoever the hell 'them' was, and I didn't know what to do." Techno took a shaky breath. "When I tried to get him to focus on me the first time I thought he did, but he just grabbed me and told me to 'get behind him, that he would take care of it and it was that face, that he pulled the other day with the book, it was like a totally different person." Techno took a breath, and Wilbur could hear the way it shook.

"Tech... I, I don't even know what to say. Dad did tell us the kid wasn't like we were." Wilbur shrugged. "And he told us himself that he had to protect the others, right? That obviously had some effect on the kid. We aren't qualified to help with whatever land mine he has going on up there, but we can be there for him, y'know? Let him know he doesn't need to protect us or be protected from us."

"Dad triggered him," Techno admitted softly. "He was apparently yelling and mad because of work. I really don't know how Tommy is going to react when he gets home, but I didn't want to be here by myself if something does happen." They both heard the car pull up to the house.

"Well, we're about to find out, because I'm pretty sure dad just pulled in."

—

Tommy was standing at the door, holding it open for Phil when they rounded the corner. He wasn't relaxed, by any means, but looked very normal. Phil gave the boy a large smile as he passed, holding several shopping bags and three boxes of pizza.

"Thanks for getting the door, kiddo!" He praised. Tommy nodded, shut the door, and took the boxes from him.

"Of course. I'll go set these down at the table." Which he did, and then was back, taking the bags before Phil could so much as set them down to take his shoes off. "Where do you want these?"

“Oh, they can go on the table too. It’s mostly list stuff, so you all can go through it and grab your things.” Tommy nodded again, taking the bags to the table. As soon as he was out of vision Phil gave Wil and Techno a questioning look and tapped his own throat, obviously asking what happened to Tommy’s voice. Wilbur mouthed ‘later’ and then turned to follow Tommy into the dining room. Phil looked more lost, but followed them into the dining room where Tommy had also gotten plates and napkins for everyone and was sitting in his usual chair, looking slightly petulant.

“Tommy, don’t pout.” Wilbur chastised playfully. Tommy stuck his tongue out at the older man but then must have seen Phil and sat up straight.

“Sorry about having to leave today, Tommy. I was supposed to work from home until you were in school but my coworkers are incompetent and managed to break a code so badly that they were considering starting it over from scratch.” Techno stiffened at the casual way Phil addressed Tommy, but Tommy himself didn’t look put off at all.

“No worries. Did you get it fixed?”

“Er, no, not really. I’ll probably have to be in the office tomorrow too, but I’ll be here Wednesday to drive you to school.” Tommy nodded, looking entirely calm if it weren’t for the way his hands trembled.

“That’s fine. I might go out for a walk tomorrow since my first trip out ended with me getting distracted by Tubbo and Ranboo. I want to be able to find my way around, you know? Might look for a job, if that’s okay.” Tommy shrugged.

“Oh, you don’t need to get a job, with school and everything you’re going to be busy, I’m sure,” Phil said kindly.

“Don’t worry, my grades aren’t going to drop. I’ve been doing odd jobs since I was a kid and working part-time since I was able to get a work license,” Tommy assured. “It’s never affected my grades or my ability to do chores. If you don’t want me to work, though, I’ll not.” Phil looked at Techno and Wilbur. Both of them had had part-time jobs at some point, but eventually, Phil asked them to cut their hours or stop working entirely during the school year because it overwhelmed them.

“I don’t think it’s a great idea, you should put your mental health first. Anything you need I’ll pay for, and obviously, within reason, things you just want I’ll buy as well, that’s what the lists are for.” Phil reminded gently, which must have made Tommy think of something because he perked up and reached into his pocket.

“Oh, right. Here’s the money for the headphones.” Tommy smiled, handing over a fifty to Phil. “I saw you grabbed them.” He gestured to the bag. “The left ear of my old ones went all static last night, so I wrote it down but didn’t know where to put the money for them.” Phil didn’t take the money but did reach in the bag and hand the headphones to Tommy.

“There isn’t anywhere to put money,” Phil said softly. Tommy took the headphones, looked at Phil for a second, then nodded as if in understanding.

“So, Venmo, then? What’s your code?”

“No, Tommy. You don’t need to pay me back. They’re headphones,” Phil laughed. “They’re important.”

“Wait, what?” Tommy asked, looking confused. “They’re not important, they’re just so I can listen to music.”

“Music is important,” Wil argued.

“I mean, for you maybe,” Tommy agreed halfheartedly, “but the headphones are just a luxury item for me, and I don’t want to blow my spending cap on something dumb.” Tommy laughed.

“*Spending cap?*” Techno asked incredulously. “What the hell is that?” and Tommy actually laughed.

“You know, the checks foster parents get for taking in the kids? So like 120 towards food and utilities and then there’s like 40 left, for other miscellaneous things.” Tommy explained easily. “Not every foster parent lets the kids have any of the money, so it’s really cool that you do, but I don’t want to run out of something dumb later and not be able to get it because I managed to break my headphones.”

“You only get 160 a month for taking care of foster kids?” Wilbur asked, surprised.

“A quarter.” Tommy and Phil replied in tandem, and Phil continued, “but that’s just the clothing payment, there are other payments and an additional payment specifically to give the kids allowance.” Tommy looked a little dismissive at that.

“You aren’t supposed to tell the kids that. That’s how you end up with brats who feel entitled to the money.” Tommy shrugged. “What you tell them is you get paid 50 cents a day and get the 160 dollar check every three months so they don’t blow through all the cash up front and then end up spending all of your personal money.”

“That’s... not how we do things here, no,” Phil said, a little stiffly. “That’s not how any foster parents should be doing things.”

“It’s an effective system. I don’t imagine you had many issues with entitlement from these two, but kids are greedy. They don’t understand the value of money and they usually don’t care. Teaching them to function on a tight budget helps prepare them for aging out of the system.” Tommy shrugged. “It’s a good skill to have. I have enough in my savings to get a small apartment and pay the first 6 months rent at all times, but as long as I get a job, by the time I’m 18 I should have enough to buy a used car in cash, too. If I wasn’t taught how to ration money I would be screwed next April.” Phil looked heartbroken at how casually the teenager talked about being thrown out at 18.

“Tommy, I’m not going to kick you out when you turn 18. You’ll be welcome here until you can make it on your own.” Phil said quietly, but Tommy laughed.

“Phil, buddy, the odds of me still living here on my 18th birthday are slim to none. No offense, I just don’t get the feeling that this is going to work out.”

The table fell into uncomfortable silence, and Techno cleared his throat.

“So.. pizza?” And everyone moved, putting pizza on their plates and trying to not look as uncomfortable as they felt.”

“So how was class? What did you two do today?” Phil asked, trying to clear the tension up by sheer will. Techno and Wil seemed to come to the silent agreement to not tell Phil what happened and started talking about their classes while Tommy chewed on his pizza and kept his head down. They stumbled through the conversation for another 45 minutes before everyone was done eating. Tommy gathered up the dishes and leftovers, putting them in the fridge, and began washing the dishes when Wilbur came in.

“Did you mean that? That you don’t think you’ll be here by next April?” He asked, drying the plates Tommy handed him.

“Yeah. It’s nothing against you guys, I just don’t stay anywhere very long,” Tommy explained casually. “I’m an asshole.”

“Obviously. It’s a real asshole move to wash the dishes unprompted and to clean the house in your free time,” Wilbur teased, bumping his shoulder against Tommy’s lightly. “Phil hasn’t fostered much, but he’s never sent a kid back. The only ones who didn’t stay asked to go, or were older than you when they came and then aged out and cut off contact with him.” Wilbur explained. “Phil is a good guy, and he’d be a good dad for you if you let him be.”

“I had a dad. I don’t need a new one,” Tommy snapped. “I’m sure he’s good for you two, but we aren’t the same.”

“Tommy...”

“No. I get it, Phil took you in and loved you and adopted you or whatever, but this is a different situation. I’m not looking to be adopted, or babied, or parented. I’m here because they won’t let me live on my own yet, and I don’t want to live on the streets.”

“Okay. Okay. You don’t have to be adopted, or consider us your family. But I’m pretty sure you aren’t going to stop any of us from caring about you, kid.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t have to do anything. You’ll figure it out on your own soon enough,” Tommy joked, but his voice was just on the edge of bitter.”

“Can I hug you?” Wilbur asked.

“Oh, at least you ask. Techno didn’t, though the dude looked like he needed one.” Tommy laughed, drying his hands on his jeans before holding his arms out in a very parental gesture like he was used to giving hugs rather than being given them. Wilbur raised an eyebrow at the Techno comment but stepped forward anyway, carefully wrapping himself around Tommy.

“I’m really sorry you’ve had such a shit go of it, Tommy,” he whispered into his hair. Tommy just shrugged a little into the hug.

“I’m really alright, dude.” Wilbur pulled back, hand on the kid’s shoulders, and looked him over.

“So, you said Techno hugged you?”

“Oh my god, yeah. I have no clue what happened there. I asked him if he was okay and just-bear hug.” Wilbur laughed, nodding.

“Techno will never admit it, but he’s a clingy bastard. Dad tho we couldn’t handle sleeping in the same room, but when we’re were younger we spent more time in the same bed than we did in our own.” Wilbur grinned. “I’ll tell him to ask first though, he was probably just freaking out.” The smile slipped a bit. “You really scared him today, I think. I’ve never seen him so shaken up.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to, and I tried apologizing, but,” Tommy shrugged. “There’s not a lot that can be done now. I’ll talk to him a little more about it when he’s calmed down a bit.”



“It’s not something you need to apologize for. It’s not your fault you got triggered or that you responded the way you did. But... maybe we should tell Phil, so he knows in the future what to avoid?”

“No. Don’t... I don’t want him to be able to hold that over me.” Wilbur saw Tommy shut down, any softness being shelled away behind steel grey eyes.

“He wouldn’t do that, Tommy. He’d probably apologize, and he’d try to never do it again.”

“Please, don’t bring it up. If he asks directly, don’t lie to him or anything, don’t get yourself in trouble for me, but otherwise, I don’t want him to know.” Tommy looked scared, almost, and Wilbur could see it, what Techno was talking about when he said Tommy looked young. It just flashed for a second, but he could see the scared barely 17 year old trapped behind years of having to be stronger, older than he really was. Wilbur sighed and nodded.

“Sure, Tommy. Whatever you need.”

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

Tommy finds a job, and math is hard

## Chapter Notes

We're finally about to get into the actual meat of the story, y'all. be excited. This is the last chapter before Tommy starts his 'speedrunning getting adopted by an entire town' arc

Tommy set out the next morning to find a job. There were several 24-hour diners, and they were all owned by single people and not by corporations, so he was pretty sure it would be easy enough for what he needed. He was lucky enough to find a place to accommodate him at the first stop.

“I’m looking for a night job. Whatever you need, but it has to be after 10 PM.” Tommy explained. 10 PM was late enough that he could sneak out since Phil hadn’t wanted him to get a job but he went to bed by 9. The owner looked at him for a second and then agreed, easy as that.

“Sure. You’re a little young to be working that late, aren’t you?” He asked, not unkindly.

“If you’re doing a background check, then yeah. But since it seems like your waitresses get paid in cash I’m going to say that I’m 18.” Tommy smirked, and the man huffed out a good-natured laugh.

“We need servers and dishwashers, I’m not picky on who we hire as long as they aren’t going to drive customers away. 10 an hour plus tips work for you?”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Great. You can start Friday, 10 to 3. We need people for that fill shift, so it’ll only be 5 hours a night and four or five nights a week. I’ll get you a few uniforms.” Tommy nodded, and when he left with his new uniforms he couldn’t keep the smile from his face.

He wandered around town, deciding to find the bakery he had seen on his first trip out but was stopped pretty quickly by Schlatt.

“Hey, kid! Heard you gave your brothers a heart attack yesterday. Good on ya.”

“They aren’t my brothers, and I didn’t do anything. How the hell did you even hear about that?”

“Dream was a mess yesterday, I annoyed him into telling me. Shouldn’t you be in school or something?” The man had fallen into pace with Tommy, which annoyed him to no end.

“Nosy bastards. I start tomorrow.” Schlatt nodded, sizing him up.

“What’s the bag?”

“They’re work uniforms, which you will not be telling anyone about because I will kick your ass.” Tommy snapped, glaring at the man.

“Jesus, no need for the threats. Who am I gonna tell, Phil? He’d probably punch me in the teeth for being on his porch.” Tommy snorted at that.

“Why, big man Phil not like you or something?”

“No, not since Wilbur came home drunk as shit and told him I gave him the booze. He hasn’t been too fond of me since.” Schlatt laughed, shrugging. “Speaking of, if you’re looking to buy...”

“No, thanks. Liquor makes people mean.” Tommy grimaced.

“Doesn’t have to be booze. Cigs, weed, coke; whatever you need, you can come to me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Tommy lied. Schlatt laughed again, swinging an arm around Tommy’s shoulders.

“Trust me, kid, everyone here ends up with a fix. This town’ll poison you yet.”

“I’ve heard it’s the neighbors,” Tommy replied flatly, turning onto the Main Street with the shops.

“Very possible. Where’re you headed?”

“The bakery. I want something sweet.” Tommy replied, shrugging. “Mostly avoiding Dream, who’s been following us for like three blocks.” Schlatt started, looking back. Sure enough, about a hundred paces back was Dream, who froze at being spotted before sheepishly walking toward them.

“How did you know he was there?” Schlatt asked, sounding baffled.

“How did you *not* know? His sweatshirt is neon green, he’s not exactly incognito. Hi, Dream.” Tommy glanced at the man who was still a few steps back. He looked sheepish, but it was hard to tell with the mask.

“Hey, Tommy. Schlatt.” He mumbled. “Sorry, I was gonna wait until Schlatt left to talk to you.”

“I could tell,” Tommy replied, sounding just a bit annoyed. “What do you need?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay, you know, after yesterday. The Blade wouldn’t tell me anything, so…”

“You call him *The Blade* ? Oh my god, that’s the funniest thing I’ve heard in my entire life.” Dream blushed red

“When he changed his name we were kids, like 11. The nickname stuck.” Dream shrugged.

“He changed his name?” Tommy asked, looking confused.

“Uh, yeah. When Phil adopted him he changed his first and last name. Said he wanted to start over.” Dream rubbed a hand on his neck. “Listen… I, are you okay? You sounded really hurt yesterday, and you look fine but…”

“It wasn’t physical shit. I had a panic attack or something, I dunno. Didn’t mean to freak you out. They’re not usually like that, I think it was just because I was home alone? Nothing to ground me or no reason to pull myself out of it I guess.” Schlatt scoffed at that.

“You need fuckin meds, dude.” Tommy glared at Schlatt.

“I will still kick your ass. Would you like me to kick your ass? Want to tell your drug buddies you got beat up by some kid who gets scared of his own thoughts?”

“No, I mean actually. If you have panic attacks like that they’re supposed to medicate you. Put you on Xanax or something so you don’t freak out and kill someone.”

“I’m not going to fucking hurt anyone! I’ve never even hit someone unless I was defending someone else! Get fucked.” Tommy snapped.

“Really? You’ve threatened to fight me like four times.”

“I wouldn’t do it, though.” Tommy shrugged. “Not because I like you, you’re a fucking prick, but I don’t *like* being violent. Shit makes me itch.” Tommy shivered.

“You picked a hell of a set of brothers, then. Techno loves fighting, and Wilbur will throw down too in the right moment.”

“Wilbur looks like a newborn giraffe and shakes when a stranger walks past. I’ll take my chances.”

“I noticed you said nothing about Tech.”

“Uh, no. Techno named himself Technoblade in middle school, he was clearly not afraid of getting his ass kicked. I would sooner pull out my own teeth than pick a fight with him.” Tommy snorted. “Can I go to the bakery now or?”

“Yeah, yeah, go ahead. I need to talk to Schlatt about something anyway.” Dream dismissed. Tommy nodded and walked away, not bothering to listen to whatever Dream was asking Schlatt.

—

The bakery was nice. The girl he’d met in the mall was working- Niki- and she’d given him a pastry for free. He’d waited until she turned away to stick a twenty in the empty tip jar, and was halfway out the door when he heard her see it. He cackled at her protests and waved as

he left, feeling lighter than he had in a long time. He wandered a bit, saying hi to Fundy and helping an older guy pick up his dropped groceries before heading back to Phil's.

He tidied the house, rolling his eyes at the soda cans once again left on the coffee table, and ate leftover pizza for lunch. He watered the flowers, not bothering to check what Techno had grown in the greenhouse, and checked the time to find it was only a little after 2. He'd oiled his door hinges so they didn't squeak anymore, a small comfort, and washed laundry, including his new uniforms, gotten the weird blue stain out of the couch cushion, and was trying to clean the pink stain that was definitely hair dye out of the downstairs shower when he heard Wilbur get home. Tommy stuck his head out just to make sure it was him before going back to his task.

Wilbur looked exhausted. He pretty much always did, but he looked particularly tired when he came in. Tommy saw him head towards the living room, so he called to him,

"Don't sit in your usual spot, the couch is still wet!" And went back to scrubbing the tiles. They were very nearly white again. When Wilbur came over, he looked confused.

"Why is the couch wet? And what the hell are you doing?"

"I got the blue out of it, and I'm *trying* to get the pink off these tiles, but your brother is a menace and should not be allowed to have manic panic." Tommy sassed.

"You got the blue out? That stains been there for like three years!" Wilbur gasped.

"What, does it hold sentimental value? I can go buy a blue sharpie and draw it back on for you." Tommy rolled his eyes.

"No, but how the hell did you get it out?"

"Peroxide and dish soap. It'll get pretty much anything out." Tommy shrugged. "Not fucking pink hair dye though, apparently." Wilbur laughed

“He’s gonna redye it soon and the shower will be pink again, don’t even bother.”

“It’ll be easier to clean a second time.” Tommy shrugged. “This is only taking so long because none of you clean properly.”

“The house isn’t dirty!”

“Dude, when was the last time you washed your sheets?” Tommy laughed at the contemplative look on Wil’s face at that. “Exactly.”

“W-well! We’re maybe a little disorganized and bad at laundry, but we aren’t *gross* or anything.”

“No, you’re fine. The house is relatively clean.” Tommy assured, careful not actually upset Wilbur. “It just could be cleaner. Hence- me.”

“You don’t have to clean either, you know. Like, whatever makes you happy I guess but nobody is going to care if you don’t use black magic to remove years old stains from the furniture.”

“Up next is whatever the hell is going on with the third stair. Why is it green?”

“I think Techno and Dream did that. It’s been like that since I got here, but Dad always rolls his eyes when he notices it, and Techno thinks it’s hilarious when you ask him.” Wilbur leaned against the door frame, watching Tommy work. “Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, I ate pizza. There are still a few slices in the box if you want some.” Tommy replied easily.



“No, I ate at school, I’m good till dinner.” Wilbur hummed, watching Tommy rinse the shower out again and grin triumphantly. “Did you get it?”

“Did you know these tiles are white? Me either.” Tommy laughed, stepping back to show Wilbur the now sparkling shower.

“Impressive. Remind me if I ever spill something to ask you how to clean it.” Wilbur teased. “Want to help me do math homework? It’s boring and will make you want to die!” Tommy laughed and followed Wilbur to the dining room.

Wilbur was not joking. The math was miserable, though mostly because Wilbur didn’t understand *any of it*. “Wil, mate, the formula is right there. You have to plug these numbers,” Tommy pointed at the page, “into this formula,” he pointed at the textbook. “You’re making it more difficult for yourself. Look, see? You have the long side of the triangle and a short side of the triangle. All you need to do is plug those in, and you’ll get the Sine. Once you have that, follow this formula and you can solve the triangle.” Wilbur groaned loudly.

“Why do I need to solve a fucking triangle for? I’m a *music* major.”

“You took the class, big man, not me. Here, let’s start over. This line is your hypotenuse, right? Since it’s opposite your right angle. You have the length of the hypotenuse and you have the opposite length, so you would-“ Tommy’s explanation was cut off by Techno coming in the house, looking equally tired as Wilbur did.

“Whoever decided we needed exams is a bitch.” He groaned, sitting down at the table next to them. “What are we working on? Please be anything but math.”

“It’s math.” Tommy deadpanned. “Tell me you aren’t also trigonometrically illiterate.”

“I cannot honestly tell you that, no,” Techno admitted, pulling out his own work. “I don’t think there’s an English major alive who understands what a unit circle is.”

“For the love of fuck.” Tommy groaned, and set off explaining, again, how to solve the triangles, now drawing it out on a sheet of paper for Techno to see. He seemed to respond well to that, so Tommy continued drawing and verbally explaining the problems to the two for another hour before they finally seemed to grasp it.

“So.. this angle is 74 degrees?” Techno asked, and Tommy nearly sobbed in relief.

“Yes! So to find the other angle-“

“You add the two angles you have and subtract them from 180?” Wilbur added, looking stunned. “Wait, wait. Did we do it? Is that right?” Tommy beamed, nodding.

“You got it! Thank god.” Tommy joked, but he was actually pleased.

“You’re an actual miracle worker.” Wilbur laughed. “He got the blue out of the couch and the pink out of the shower, too Techno. I call dibs when one of us inevitably moves out.”

“You got the blue out of the couch? Didn’t dad try for like a week to do that?” Techno asked, baffled. “Also, no, I met him first, I have seniority.”

“Dual custody of the child?” Wilbur offered, holding out a hand very formally. Techno shook it, nodding seriously.

“I get Christmas.” Tommy snorted at that.

“Okay, if you’re done, you still have another fifteen of these to do.” Both men grimaced but went back to working on the problems.

Phil found the three of them laughing and joking at the table, and he could feel himself smile against his will. They seemed very casual, like they had known each other for ages. He

tapped his fingers on the wall before he spoke up, something he'd noticed Tommy did to announce his presence and immediately adopted.

"You look like you're having fun. What're you working on?" Wilbur groaned good-naturedly.

"We are not having fun, Tommy is forcing us to understand *Math*." Phil let out a loud laugh at that.

"Fighting a losing battle there, mate. Neither of them can count." But when he looked at the table, there were quickly drawn diagrams and notes that he was sure neither of the older two had written, and their work looked nearly done.

"They're doing fine, now." Tommy gestured at the homework. "It was a bit like pulling teeth to get 'em there, but..."

"Tommy's a genius, Dad. He knows what tau is. Who knows what tau is?" Wilbur cried dramatically.

"And he got the blue out of the couch," Techno added seriously. "Wil and I have called dibs."

"The fabric dye? You got fabric dye out of the couch?"

"Yes. It's apparently a miracle." Tommy rolled his eyes. "Do you need help with those bags? They're both almost done." Tommy offered, standing up and taking the grocery bags Phil was holding without waiting for an answer. "Just stuff for the kitchen, right?" Phil nodded, and Tommy left to put them away.

"He made you two understand math, and he got the stain out of the couch? He completed two impossible tasks in one day?" Phil teased, taking a seat and looking over the worksheets. It all looked like Greek to him. "Jesus, what even is this? Did they change math when I wasn't looking?"

“Yeah, things got a little dicey after the discovery of the wheel, Dad.” Techno deadpanned, and Wilbur burst into giggling.

“You’re grounded,” Phil warned.

“I’m twenty-one, you can’t ground me!”

“My house, my rules. You can be ungrounded when my shower isn’t pink.” Phil joked, and Wilbur burst into laughter.

“Tommy fixed that too. Did you know those tiles are white?” Phil gaped for a minute.

“There is no way he got that dye off those tiles. They’ve been pink for a *decade* .” Phil took off towards the bathroom, and Techno and Wilbur both laughed loudly at the quiet ‘how the fuck’ that they heard from Phil not even a minute later. “Tommy, mate, be honest, did you just repaint the tiles when nobody was home?” Phil asked, coming back in. “Or did you just replace them?”

“I *cleaned them* ,” Tommy replied, shaking his head. “As long as Techno rinses the shower out after he’s done they should stay white for a while.”

“You’re a miracle worker.”

“That sounded like a threat.” Phil and Techno replied at the same time.

“It was a threat. My hands feel like they’re going to bleed after scrubbing those tiles. I expect them to stay clean for more than two weeks.” Techno huffed at that, sinking in his chair.

“Okay, *Mom*, ” Techno replied, almost petulant, before standing up. “What do you guys want for dinner?”

“I bought the stuff for that chicken you like, with the lemon,” Phil replied, casually. “But there’s other stuff too. Whatever you want to make.” Wilbur nodded in agreement.

“Sure, that’ll work.” Techno agreed and went to go cook. Tommy took that as good an excuse as any to go back to the room he was staying in and relax for a bit, laying on the bed and listening to quiet music until he was called for dinner.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

Tommy talks to his not-quite brothers about family.

Tommy arrived at school with something akin to a bowling ball's worth of anxiety in his stomach. Phil dropped him off with a smile, and Tommy pretended like being alone in a car with the man wasn't awful, and then he was there, standing in front of the red brick building with a bag slung over one shoulder and a schedule with his locker number and classes. He was told the paperwork had been sorted already, and that since it was such a small school he wouldn't need a guide, but he still felt out of his depth. When he pushed through the front door, he immediately figured out what they meant.

There was one main hallway, where apparently all of the lockers were, and then each hallway that branched off had a sign indicating what classrooms were there. The gymnasium was at one far end, in the athletic wing, and it looked like both the theater and art rooms were at the other. Where he walked in was directly next to the cafeteria, and Tommy was pleased to find it did actually seem impossible to get lost. He passed the 'History Hall' and made it to his new locker, throwing his stuff in, save for a notebook, pencil, and his schedule. He had his phone in his pocket and his earbuds hung across his neck as he made it to his assigned homeroom.

He was pleasantly surprised to see Tubbo already in there, sitting casually at a table with a few people Tommy didn't recognize and clearly talking passionately. He glanced up, and grinned wildly when he saw Tommy. "Anyway, that's why I think frogs should vote. Bye!" Tubbo jumped up and walked over to Tommy with a grin. "We must have similar last names!"

"Yeah, mines Shroud." Tommy agreed. "So what's the deal with this place, how much does it suck?" Tommy asked, taking a seat at an empty table with Tubbo.

"Eh, it's school. Kinda miserable, mostly fine. Can I see your schedule?" Tommy handed it over, and Tubbo let out a little excited hum.

“Oh, our schedules are similar! We’ll have English and Anatomy together, and us and Ranboo will have art and foods with both of us, and I think you’re in Government with him too... and we’ll have lunch together!” Tommy relaxed at that, relieved he’d know someone in at least most of his classes. “I don’t know anyone in Trig-trigo- whatever maths you have.” Tubbo’s nose scrunched up at that.

“Trigonometry, it’s basically geometry but they have it out for triangles specifically.”

“That sounds hard, why didn’t you take something easier?” Tubbo asked, confused.

Tommy shrugged. “This school doesn’t have enough math classes and I’ve already taken the lower level ones at my old school,” Tommy explained. “I’m not expecting it to be hard, I literally just had to walk Techno and Wilbur through trig yesterday.”

“Ooh, you’re like, smart smart, huh?” Tubbo teased. “Well you won’t be hanging around me long then, I can’t even read.” Tommy laughed incredulously.

“What- like at all?”

“Like, it’s... sort of like letter soup when I try. The words float around on the page and it actually hurts my eyes to try to focus on them.” Tubbo explained with a shrug.

“Tubbo, you idiot. That’s dyslexia. You’re dyslexic.” Tommy snorted. “They make like, typefaces that are dyslexic friendly, yknow? To help with it, but you could also get audio textbooks or something. You’re not stupid.”

“You called me an idiot and not stupid in the same sentence!” Tubbo complained. “I thought dyslexic people just saw the letters out of order.”

“Well, they can, but that’s not all there is to it. I had a foster sister once try to explain it to me, but basically, it’s like your brain isn’t getting the whole picture? Like it doesn’t decode the shapes it sees into language correctly because the letter shapes are too similar and it struggles

to tell them apart.” Tommy explained. “It doesn’t make you stupid, though. Just means you have to do things differently.”

“This is surprisingly nice behavior from someone who called themselves a problem child.” Tubbo teased.

“Oh, fuck off, bitch. Go back to being illiterate.” Tommy groaned loudly.

“Quite colorful language for your first day, Mr. Shroud.” A teacher with short grey hair and a very stern look on her face said from the doorway.

“Uh, sorry, ma’am.” Tommy blushed, and Tubbo snickered, dodging the quick jab Tommy sent his way.

“Mhm. Shroud, are you related to Devon?” She asked, and as Tommy had no idea who ‘Devon’ was, he shook his head.

“No ma’am. I just moved here.”

“Any other siblings later down the line that I should watch for?” She asked, and Tommy shrugged.

“Not that I know of, but you might get a handful of kids who I temporarily helped raise, so if you’re worried about it...” Tommy said, just a bit of joking in his tone. The Teacher’s eyes twinkled, and she gave him a grin.

“Mr. Shroud, stay after the first bell for me, will you?” And Tommy nearly groaned. How had he gotten in trouble so quickly? Tubbo shot him a teasing look and left when the bell rang a few minutes later.

“You wanted to speak with me, ma’am?” He asked, keeping his tone polite.



“Manners don’t suit you. Don’t worry, I’ll let your first-period teacher know I kept you. Are you by chance a foster child?” She asked, conversationally. “One of Phil’s, I’d assume.” Tommy jumped at that.

“Uh- yeah.”

“Excellent! Tell the boys I said hello, and Phil as well. How are you liking it?” She still looked stern, a bit intimidating, but her voice was soft and playful.

“It’s... fine, I guess? I haven’t been there long.” Tommy shrugged.

“You’ll love it, and those boys will be good for you. I had both of them for several classes every year, they were always a joy to teach.” Tommy rolled his eyes, just a little.

“Clearly you’ve never had to explain a triangle to them.” The teacher laughed, nodding.

“That is true. I teach history, government, and psychology. I saw you were in my History and Psychology classes. Since it’s so late in the year I’m not going to give you textbooks, you can just use one of the classroom ones, but I look forward to teaching you, Thomas.”

“It’s- uh- Tommy.” Tommy winced, correcting her. “Just Tommy.”

“Oh, I’ll make a note of that, and let your other teachers know. Thank you, Tommy.” She smiled at him again, and Tommy just nodded. “You can head over to Mr. Cornell’s class, I’ll let him know you’re on your way.” Tommy nodded, and booked it toward his Trig classroom, walking very quickly down the now mostly empty hall. When he made it to the room, the teacher was already at the door, holding it open.

“Hello! Tommy, was it? Come in, take a seat wherever is open.” Tommy smiled gratefully and walked through the door to see that the room was mostly empty. Only five other students,

all of which seemed to be in their last year of school as opposed to Tommy, with an entire year left after this. They all also looked very stuck up, giving off an air of 'I'm smarter than you and I can prove it.' Tommy took a seat close to the door but away from mostly everyone. There was one student about three desks away who looked at him smugly.

"You know this is an AP senior course, right?" She asked, snarky.

"Yeah, I'm aware. The school doesn't offer higher-level classes than this, and I've taken the others already. Tommy rolled his eyes. "Trust me, I don't want to be in something as boring as AP Trig either." That seemed to shut her up. The class went quickly, and thankfully the teacher told him that since it was so late in the year he wasn't going to issue Tommy a textbook either, that he could borrow a classroom copy if needed but that he should be fine to go without.

Most of Tommy's classes went similarly. English with Tubbo was interesting, since he really wasn't kidding when he said he couldn't read. Anatomy was fine, if a little boring, since it was basically the same as the physiology class he had taken a year prior. Most interesting of his morning classes was Government, where the teacher from that morning, Mrs. Bolock, seemed to lead a chaotic teaching style that baffled Tommy. She was explaining the French Revolution, but she wasn't reading from a textbook, just writing it down on the board as she went, telling the information more like a story than anything. She got sidetracked telling them small fun facts about certain people known in the revolution, and Tommy found himself actually interested for once as she spoke. Tommy jotted down a small note for Ranboo, who sat next to him, *'how does she just know this stuff?'* And Ranboo's quick reply nearly made Tommy laugh out loud. ***'She's been teaching for like 100 years and she was old when she started... she was probably there.'***

"Okay, everyone! I'm going to give you your chapter study guides, you know the drill. Fill them out based on your notes, bring whatever you get done to class tomorrow and I'll go over anything you didn't get." Mrs. Bolock handed out packets, and Tommy noticed his was a bit thicker than the ones everyone else had. Stuck to it was a post-it note that said 'here are the printed notes for the parts of the chapter you missed!' Tommy smiled gratefully at her and stuck it in his notebook. "Tommy, get a folder!" She lightly chastised him. "You'll lose assignments that way." She was already pulling out folders from a cabinet behind them, setting a few on his desk. "Here, this way you can separate your work." She patted his shoulder and then went back to talking about something to the class, something that had nothing to do with history at all, but Tommy couldn't focus. Something about the kind gesture had shaken him, and it took a lot of effort not to lose it entirely when he tucked his day's homework into the folders. It was something entirely mundane, and they were cheap paper folders that probably cost 10 cents apiece, but it still felt significant.

Lunch was an adventure. When he'd tried to put money in his lunch account the lunch lady told him there was already 50 dollars there, which should be plenty to get him through the last month and a half of school, and he'd sat at a table with Tubbo, Ranboo, the jumpy kid they called purpled, and a few others Tommy didn't really know. He made it through without embarrassing himself, kept Tubbo from burning down the foods classroom when they made cookies, and narrowly avoided a paint war between Ranboo and Tubbo in art. He didn't know anyone in his psychology class, but Mrs. Bolock was so interesting he didn't find that he minded much, just taking notes and listening to her explain what brain waves you had in different parts of sleep, which should have been boring, was enough to keep him focused. He was at his locker after final bell, gathering his things when it struck him that he didn't actually know how he was meant to get back to Phil's. The walk wasn't too long, probably just around an hour, but it would be annoying. The dilemma was solved for him when he exited the front doors and spotted Wilbur's car in the parking lot, him sitting on the hood and chatting with Eret, who Tommy had learned was Tubbo's older sibling, and Sam, who apparently was living with Ranboo. Tommy hadn't quite figured out the dynamic there. Tommy approach slowly, and was apparently quickly spotted, because all three of them looked up and raised a hand in greeting. He waved back, and made his way to Wilbur's car.

"How was your first day, Toms?" Wilbur asked with a smile.

"It was fine. Mrs. Bolock says hello." Tommy shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets awkwardly. "You didn't need to leave class to come to get me, you know. I could have walked.

"My classes are done at 2 on Wednesday and Friday. Tech will probably pick you up on Thursdays, since he doesn't have any classes at all, and Eret has agreed to drop you off Monday and Tuesday, since they're picking up Tubbo anyway. We're gonna trade-off basically. Convenient for everyone!" Tommy hesitated but nodded eventually.

"Sure, that works."

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When they were driving away, Wilbur asked again about school.

“You said it was fine, but I wanted to give you a second chance to talk about it,” Wilbur explained. “So how was it? First days are always tough.”

“No, really, it was fine. Nice, even. I really like Mrs. Bolock’s classes, and the ones Tubbo and Ranboo aren’t in were chill. It was... okay.” Tommy shrugged.

“Yeah, Bolock is great. Next year take her History and Culture through film class, it’s excellent.”

“I think I’m picking my classes for next year on Friday, so I’ll take that one. If I’m still in the same school district next year it’ll be nice to have her again.” Tommy agreed, and Wilbur’s knuckles tightened just slightly on the wheel.

“You will be there for next school year,” Wilbur stated, leaving no room for argument. Naturally, Tommy argued anyway.

“Y’know, my last house was the only time I’d ever made it through a summer break in one place? It’s for a reason. I get... antsy, staying somewhere for too long without enough structure. Even with structure, I don’t like staying places. I get it that Phil’s like, your hero or whatever, but I don’t think I’ll be here long.”

“Is it because of us? Me and Tech? We can back off, if you want.” Tommy shook his head.

“No, you’re fine. It’s nothing to do with anything. Well- maybe Phil a little, I don’t really like him, but it’s just... how I am. I don’t want to be tied down anywhere yet. I have a year left to float around and do whatever I want before I have to buckle down and figure my shit out. I don’t want to spend it in just one place.”

“I... that’s not what family is, Tommy. It’s not something to keep you down, your family is just there to pick you up when you fall, not to keep you stuck. It’s just... Somewhere to come back to.”

“Maybe for you. I don’t... feel the same way.” Tommy said hesitantly. Wilbur just sighed and pulled into the driveway.

“Okay, bud. You have your key?” Tommy nodded, pulling it out from the lanyard Phil had given him. “Good, okay. I’ll see you tonight. Don’t scrub the carpets or anything while I’m not here, okay?”

“Oh, you’re leaving?” Tommy asked, unbuckling.

“Yeah. I have therapy on Wednesdays.” Wilbur replied, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Oh, okay. Good Luck.” Tommy shrugged, getting out of the car and giving Wil a small smile before heading inside.

Tommy did not scrub the carpets. He did sweep the floors and vacuum, but after that, he just went to the bedroom and started working on assignments. Several teachers had told him he wouldn’t have to do the homework for this unit, but he’d opted to do it anyway, not wanting to miss any information that could be learned from them. He had his headphones in and turned up pretty loud, so he didn’t hear when Techno got home. Techno had actually made it inside, set his homework down, and started dinner in the oven before Tommy noticed he was there, and even then he didn’t bother going downstairs for another twenty minutes, finishing up his homework before heading down to the smells of something very rich, like mushrooms, maybe, and to the sight of Techno doing his own homework at the dining table.

“Do you need help?” Tommy asked when Techno looked up at him. “You look frustrated.”

“No, no. I’m okay. Wilbur is late.” Techno grunted.

“He had therapy today.” Tommy reminded gently, sitting down. “That takes a lot out of people, he might have just needed some time to himself.”

“I know. I *know* , I just hate how quiet the house is when he’s not here.” Techno explained. “He used to come straight home, but the last month or so he just stays out for hours afterward. I know he has his own life, and I see him every day, but...”

“He’s your brother. I get it.” Tommy nodded.

“Do you?” Techno asked, looking surprised. “Uh- that sounded bad, I just meant-” Tommy cut him off with a laugh.

“Yeah, I know what you meant. I don’t *get it* , I guess. I don’t have any siblings, but I get worrying about people you care about.” Tommy explained. “Not having a family doesn’t mean I haven’t had friends or people I was close to.” Tommy shrugged. “It’s normal, to worry about them.”

“Wil calls me clingy.”

“Wil’s a bitch.” Tommy teased. “He’s just as protective over you.”

“You.. you’re different today,” Techno muttered. “Why are you acting so normal?” Tommy actually laughed at that too.

“Don’t be a bitch, Technoblade. I’m trying to be nice to you!”

“No, I mean,” Techno’s face screwed up a little. “When it’s just me or Wil you have two moods. Either it’s this- acting like, like this rational and very calm guy who has 40 years of life experience over us, or you act like you did at the mall, where you were a feral teenager. Why?” Tommy hummed a little.

“I don’t know. I’m just being who I need to be, I guess.”

“Who’s the real Tommy, then? Which one isn’t the act?”

“Neither of them. There isn’t a real Tommy.” He shrugged. “I’m just... a patchwork of different Tommys and Toms and Thomases. Whatever I need to be.” Tommy rubbed his neck and smiled a little. “Magaret said that I was like having ten kids.”

“Your last foster mother?”

“Yeah. She was alright. Her husband didn’t really like me much, but she usually seemed pretty okay with me.”

“Why aren’t you still with her, then?” Techno asked bluntly, but not unkindly.

“Her kid *hated* me. She offered me adoption papers and he lost it, told her she was replacing him and that she didn’t care about him anymore, you know.” Tommy shrugged. “It wasn’t going to work.”

“Were you going to say yes?” Tech asked, not looking up from his paper.

“No,” Tommy replied easily. “But neither of them knew that. I don’t want to be adopted, I don’t think family is really... my thing. It was nothing against any of them, either. Margaret was kind, and always supportive of me, and I liked them all, I just... I don’t want that. I don’t want anyone to take care of me, and I don’t want some stupid paper that says I belong to someone. I just want to turn 18 and leave everything behind.” Tommy sighed. “Family makes people do stupid things.”

“Yeah, it does,” Techno agreed. “The problem is that I don’t actually think you pick your family. You can not want it all you want, but one day you just wake up and realize you’re home anyway.”

“Like you and Dream?” Tommy guessed.

“Yeah. Like that. And like Phil and Wilbur. I’ve known Wilbur for almost 16 years, you know. We both went through some of the same houses, in the early days. And when I ended up here, and Wil got kicked out of another house, I asked Dad to take him in. I had already been adopted, I was like 13, and Wil called me on some shitty payphone crying that his foster had told him to leave, and I didn’t want to see him somewhere else that couldn’t help him.” Techno shrugged. “And Dad did. Just like that, Wil showed up with his guitar and three shirts and no socks and Phil took him in, patched him up, and let us be a family.”

“That was nice of him.”

“That’s Phil. He’s a good guy, Tommy. He doesn’t need to be your Dad, but he can be family, if you let him. We all can be.” Tommy hummed, not willing to disagree. They sat in silence for a little bit, just spending time thinking in each other’s presence.

Wil came home, eventually, looking tired and like he’d been crying. Tommy made him tea, and Techno didn’t complain when Wilbur curled up next to him, and nobody mentioned the way his hands shook. It was domestic. Not family, but something soft and pleasant and safe.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

Tommy's new routine gets upset

Thursday passed, and Friday followed easily. Then it was Friday night, and Tommy was getting ready for work. It was dark, and Tommy knew Phil was already asleep. Wilbur wasn't on the roof yet, he waited until midnight before ever bothering to sneak out, so Tommy was confident he could get out without any issues. He'd scoped out the backyard, and knew the tree next to the house would allow him easy access to the ground, so he slid on his non-slip shoes and pulled himself out. He made it down the tree and was out in less than two minutes. The walk to the diner took less than ten minutes, and he was there. His boss led him through, introducing him to the night cook and the only other server, a frazzled woman with mousy brown hair and a too peppy grin. He was shown where he'd wash dishes since they would be taking turns doing that, and then pretty much set him loose. The diner was slow, feeling more like busywork than anything. Tommy only sat two or three tables, but he made 20 dollars in tips and was given 50 in cash when he left. It was easy work, but he was tired when he made it back to the house. He slipped in the unlocked window and collapsed into bed.

He'd slept a little later than he wanted to, waking up around 8 AM, showered, and went downstairs. He nodded politely at Phil and grabbed a glass of water.

"Hey, Tommy." Phil greeted. "What're you doing today?"

"Uh, laundry, I think." Tommy shrugged. "I was thinking about trying my hand at getting that stain on the stairs out, but honestly I don't think there's any saving it." Phil laughed good-naturedly at that.

"Don't bother, It's fine where it is." Phil hummed and glanced at his phone. "I was thinking about seeing if you and the boys were up for going to the beach today. I thought it might be nice to get out a bit."

“That sounds good.” Tommy agreed. “Do you want me to wake Wil?”

“Sure. I can wake Techno.”

“Techno is in the greenhouse,” Tommy noted. “His boots are gone,” Pointing to the front door. Phil looked surprised.

“Huh, I didn’t even hear him come out,” Phil muttered. “I can wake Wil if you want to get Tech then, I’m banned from the greenhouse, Techno thinks my presence will kill the plants.” Tommy huffed out a laugh and slipped his shoes on, walking around the house to find Techno elbow deep in the dirt.

“Your Dad wants to go to the beach today,” Tommy said after tapping the side of the house. “If you’re up for it.”

“Oh god, he wants to *bond*” Techno groaned. “Be prepared to learn too much about tide pools.”

—

Tommy was not surprised to know that Technoblade was not kidding. Wilbur and Phil both talked excitedly about the fish and animals. The water was still too cold to swim in, but they were both shin-deep in the shallows, looking for shells and enjoying themselves. Tommy was sitting just out of reach of the tide, and Techno had wandered off to look at some of the rock formations further down the shore. Whenever Wilbur looked up at Tommy, Tommy would prompt him to keep talking by asking questions. It wasn’t *fun*, per se, but Tommy wasn’t having a bad time. He could see the cliffs, the water, and if he squinted he could almost make out a small island-like landmass in the waves. The place was pretty. Wilbur eventually convinced Tommy to come into the water, and it was fine, the water was cool but not cold, and the sand beneath his feet gritty but not upsetting. Wilbur looked happy, less stressed than he had in the week Tommy had known him, and he wondered if this was the Wilbur Techno had said Tommy wouldn’t recognize. Tommy disagreed.

This Wilbur looked happy, was happy, but Tommy could still see the weariness underneath. He could still see the man who smoked on rooftops and cried at the weight of not being enough. The edges were softened, but a blunted sword could still do damage. Tommy

brushed it away, letting Wilbur and Phil show him the animals and laughing at their jokes. When Wilbur left to bother Techno, Phil and Tommy were left alone. It wasn't as tense out here as it was in the house, but it was nowhere near relaxed.

"So, Tommy..." Phil started, looking a little out of place. Tommy wondered if he looked the same way. "How... how are you liking it? Staying with us, I mean. George will be back to check in tomorrow." Tommy knew Phil had seen his files, knew that Phil knew how many houses Tommy had left behind, leaving on the first check-in without ever so much as saying why, so he knew what he was being asked.

"My bags aren't packed," was all Tommy answered. Phil understood.

"I'm glad. We like having you around. Home feels more full, with you there." Phil said earnestly.

"Just a game of chicken to see who gets claustrophobic first, eh?" Tommy joked, maybe a little more bitter than was necessary. "Thank you, for allowing me to stay in your home, by the way. I haven't said it, but I do appreciate it." Phil smiled softly.

"It's my pleasure to have you with us." Tommy gave Phil a small smile and patted his arm.

"We should probably make sure Techno isn't drowning Wil," Tommy replied, already heading towards the shore, in the direction of the other two, who were, in fact, arguing playfully. Tommy sided with Technoblade just to watch Wilbur complain, and Phil pretended to stay impassive. By the time they left, Wilbur had gathered a small bag of shells and Techno was all but asleep in the backseat, leaning against the window and fiddling with a 'hag stone' he had found in an offshoot stream. Tommy watched the trees go by, and the car was silent, but not tense.

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Three weeks since the beach had passed, and Tommy had slipped into the routine seamlessly. He was feeling the weight of less sleep, but it wasn't nearly as bad as he was expecting, and

he was glad to be working again. He was at work now, playfully teasing the waitress who was working with him, actually. Her name was Emma, and she was his favorite coworker. They'd worked together most nights, and they'd found they got along incredibly well. She was currently complaining about the old man who had been hitting on her, and they were both leaning against the counter when two obviously drunken men stumbled through the door, leaning on each other and giggling. Emma rolled her eyes, but Tommy stiffened. He'd recognize that stupid jacket anywhere, with the crudely made patches and blue stain down the front. It was Wilbur, and he was with Schlatt, of all people.

"Friends of yours?" She asked flatly, looking at Tommy.

"Something like that, yeah." Tommy grimaced.

"Want me to take care of them? You can go hang out with Deo in the kitchen." Tommy was about to take her up on that when Wilbur spotted him.

"Tommy! You're at home, why are you here!" He grinned. Tommy groaned.

"I got 'em. Take a break." Emma looked at him a little suspiciously but nodded anyway.

"Hey, guys. What do you want to drink?" Tommy asked, sitting them in a booth near the doors.

"You, what, work here?" Schlatt asked. "Is that legal?"

"I'm not twelve, Schlatt. I'm allowed to have a job."

"No, I know, but it's like two in the morning!"

"Does Dad know you have a job? I bet he doesn't. I won't tell him." Wilbur giggled.

“No, Phil doesn’t know, which is *why* I’m working so late. What do you want to drink?”

“Uh.. can we have milkshakes?” Wilbur asked, grinning.

“Sure. What flavor?” Wilbur squinted at him a little.

“I want strawberry,” Tommy shook his head, exasperated.

“Wil, you told Techno *yesterday* that strawberry ice cream was the devil incarnate. What flavor do you want?”

“I *knew* you were listening. You pretended to not hear me but I could tell.”

“Chocolate?” Tommy asked, not responding. Wilbur pouted but nodded. Schlatt nodded too.

“Same for me. And... a cup of coffee, black.”

“Perfect. Do you want food too or do you want to look over the menu?”

“No food, just the drinks, please,” Schlatt answered, and Tommy mock saluted before heading to the back. He could see Emma and Deo watching him.

“Nosy,” Tommy accused, grabbing a mug to fill with coffee and handing Deo the order slip.

“How do you know them? They look older than you.” Emma asked.

“Uh, the tall brunet in the brown jacket is my... foster brother, I guess. Schlatt, the other one, is just some asshole.” Tommy shrugged. “They won’t cause trouble, they’re just being annoying.”

“Gasp, Big Man Tommy has a *family*?” Deo joked, handing Tommy the now made milkshakes.

“No, he does not. Bite me,” Tommy threatened, glaring at them both. They both giggled, and Emma rolled her eyes very dramatically.

“My name’s Tommy and I work alone, no burdens to weigh me down, no mere Earthly possessions are worthy of me” She mocked.

“Bite. Me.” Tommy laughed, taking the two their drinks. “Here you go, one black coffee, and two chocolate milkshakes. Anything else?” Wilbur grinned lazily at him.

“You have a customer service voice. Sounds way nicer than you usually do. I don’t like it.” Tommy snorted.

“I don’t get tipped well if I call the customers bitches, Wilbur.” Wil nodded sagely at that, and Tommy turned around to make a face at his coworkers. They both laughed at him, the traitors. “Let me know if you need anything, okay? Just call, I’ll be able to hear you.” They both nodded, and he bolted back to the kitchen, groaning softly and laying his head against the counter. Emma patted his back in faux sympathy. “Fuck off, E.” He hissed.

“What’s the big deal? They don’t seem to be doing anything but sitting there.”

“They aren’t even supposed to know I work here,” Tommy explained. “Schlatt knew I had a job, but Wil didn’t, and now I have to worry about him telling his dad if I piss him off.” Tommy stood up.

“What, you don't want your foster to know you're working?” Emma knew he was 17, and that he was certainly not allowed to be working this shift, but if she thought anything of it, she'd never said it to Tommy.

“He didn't want me to get a job in the first place,” Tommy explained. “Thought it'd be better for me to just focus on schoolwork.”

“What, was he worried your 4.0 would drop to a 3.95?” Deo laughed.

“Maybe. Who knows, honestly. I just didn't want it to be a problem.”

“Well if he gives you shit, let me know. I can take him,” Emma threatened.

“You're 5 foot 1,” Tommy deadpanned. “I can handle it.” Emma looked furious, but since she and Tommy both knew she was *actually* 5 feet even, she didn't have an actual argument.

“I hate you, I'm telling bossman you were bullying me.”

“Oh no, whatever will I do? He might tell me to...” Tommy whispered the word like it was dirty, “*apologize*.” They all three lost it, Deo tucking his head to his chest and leaning over the sink, wheezing, Emma laying across Deo's back, howling with laughter, and Tommy leaning on the counter, trying to stifle his own giggles. “These night shifts are making us delirious, oh my God.” He choked out.

“You love us anyway!” Emma teased.

“I tolerate your presence,” Tommy replied, lying through his teeth. Their fake argument was cut off by Wilbur's voice, just a touch too loud to be polite.

“Tooommmmyyyy!” Tommy shook his head and went back out to the dining area.

“What do you need, Wilbur?”

“What time are you done working?”

“Three. Why?” Wilbur pouted.

“It’s almost three now, though.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Ugh.” Wilbur pouted, and Tommy looked at Schlatt for clarification.

“I told him he’d need to go home when you were done with work,” Schlatt explained. “I figured you’d keep him from dying trying to climb the tree.”

“He can’t use the front door? He’s twenty-two years old.”

“Techno will yell at meee,” Wil whined.

“Maybe you deserve to be yelled at, if you spend your Friday nights harassing waiters in diners,” Tommy snarked, but there was no fire in his tone. “There’s no way in hell I’m getting you up that tree without waking up the whole block.” Wil pouted but nodded. Tommy gave them their check, which Schlatt paid with two twenties. “Uh, your bill was 9 dollars.” Tommy laughed, trying to hand the other twenty back, but Schlatt shook his head.

“It’s a *tip*,” he said emphatically.



“You’re tipping 300%?” Tommy laughed, still holding out the twenty. “No.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Schlatt, no.”

“Schlatt, yes.” They glared at each other for a moment before shrugged and pocketed it.

“Whatever, Big man. Your money to waste.”

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Wilbur and Tommy were walking to the house, Wil leaning on Tommy heavily, when Tommy finally decided to ask, “Why did you decide to go get drunk with Schlatt?”

“He asked to hang out, so I said yes.” Wilbur shrugged. “Schlatt is my friend.”

“Schlatt is a nosy drug dealer with a God complex,” Tommy replied flatly. “Drinking like this is bad for your mental health.”

“Please don’t mom at me,” Wilbur whined. “I’m already going to have to hear it from Tech tonight and Dad tomorrow morning.”

“Neither of them has to walk you home, so I think I’m entitled,” Tommy snarked. “I’m sure you know the effects of your medicine and alcohol, and you know what you feel like the day after you drink. Is that really worth it?”

“Feels pretty good right now!” Wilbur giggled.

“And tomorrow? When your head is pounding and you’re exhausted, when you feel like garbage, and not just physically? When your hands are shaking and you feel on edge for no reason? When you don’t want to drag yourself out of bed? Will it be worth it, to feel good now, when you have to deal with that later?” Wilbur frowned, looking at Tommy with round, wondrous, glassy eyes.

“Why do you know what it feels like to be hungover?”

“Shut up, Wil. It’s none of your business.” Tommy snapped.

“Okay,” Wilbur mumbled, looking a little deflated. “Techno called you his little brother the other day. In the math class we’re both in.”

“Good for Techno.”

“I call you my little brother all the time. Dad probably calls you his youngest son.”

“I really don’t care.”

“You’re family, you know.”

“We aren’t a family. You’re a family and I’m a house guest.”

“Tommy...” Wil started as they trekked through Phil’s yard and stopped on the porch.

“Shut the fuck up, Wilbur. Give me a second to get inside before you come through the door. Do not tell Techno or Phil I was out.”

“...okay,” Wilbur replied in a small voice. Tommy wasn’t even halfway through the window when he heard the door open. He tumbled inside, quickly stripped and switched into a pair of pajama pants, and stuffed his uniform into the closet. He heard Techno come out of his room, and then quiet arguing. He heard Techno walking Wilbur to his room, voice low and hissing out instructions to ‘be quiet’ or ‘shut the fuck up before you wake up Tommy and Dad.’

Tommy would have laughed if he wasn’t still so thrown off by the whole conversation with Wilbur. Instead, he just wrapped himself up in a blanket and laid down. It was another ten minutes before he heard Techno leave Wilbur’s room. He pretended to be asleep when he heard Techno open his door, presumably to check and see if he was okay, then shut it again. Techno usually did that, right around 3:45, when he’d wake up and put coffee on for Phil before going back to bed. Phil apparently had no idea Techno did it, and had asked hundreds of times before giving up. Tommy wasn’t always awake for it, depending on how quickly he got home he would usually be at least mostly asleep when he came in, but he’d caught him doing it a handful of times, usually if he checked on him and Wilbur first. It was almost sweet. A very overprotective brother move to do, checking to make sure your siblings are sleeping okay. Tommy shook that thought from his brain angrily and slammed his face down into his pillow. He was asleep in less than ten minutes.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

When Wilbur burns, Tommy burns with him. (And so does the house.)

Alternatively, 'The guitar can be fixed, but we can't.'

## Chapter Notes

This is a rough one, I apologize in advance.

Tommy could feel the tension when he came down for breakfast. Phil looked disappointed, Techno annoyed, and Wilbur looked *miserable*. Tommy just rolled his eyes, speaking just a touch louder than necessary to be petty, and carried on like normal. Tommy was in a good mood. Schlatt's 30 dollars meant he had made 120 at work, and meant that after he set aside the allotted money for savings he still had 140 dollars to spend on anything he wanted from the past week.

The day passed slowly and the tension mostly evaporated, but Wilbur just kept looking worse, so Tommy decided to try to lighten the mood in the best way he knew how, which was pestering Wilbur into doing things Tommy knew Wilbur would enjoy.

"Wil, Wilbur, Wiiiiiiii. Please play me your new song. I just want to hear it." Tommy whined, ignoring the glare he was shot.

"It's not done yet. I don't even like it."

"But *I* like it. And I want to hear it, and you haven't put it online yet." Tommy spent a lot of time listening to the music Wilbur had posted online. Techno complained often that Wilbur had ruined Tommy's music sense permanently, but Tommy didn't mind. Wilbur's music was *good*. Really good, and even the songs that were just for humor would stick in Tommy's head for days. Wil often would play snippets of his new songs for Tommy whenever they spent

time together. Techno too, but Tommy was usually the better person to play for when Wil needed a confidence boost.

Wil eventually conceded, grabbing his guitar and sitting in the hallway. Tommy sat across from him, grinning. Wilbur told him constantly that he could just come into his room, but Tommy was very adamant about *not* entering any of their bedrooms. It was one of the very few things he'd taken a hard stance on, and had refused to explain why. Tommy was singing along, laughing when Wil glared at him and relieved to see some of the tension in Wilbur's shoulders *finally* leaving, when it happened. They had just gotten to the chorus, and Wilbur strummed, and suddenly the chord went sour. Tommy looked confused for a second before he realized it was just the sound of a string snapping. "Ooof, big man. Looks like it's time to replace those bad boys," He teased, but Wilbur wasn't laughing.

He was just staring blankly at the guitar for a second, then there were tears. Now, Tommy *knew* a broken string wasn't a huge deal on a guitar. Strings broke all the time. But maybe it was just the straw that broke the camel's back because Wilbur was staring at it like it was the end of the world, and the silent tears were becoming sobs, and Tommy wasn't sure what to do. He could pull someone out of a panic attack, he could defend someone from outside forces, hold their hand when they were scared, and gently coax them back to sleep after a nightmare, but he was not equipped to help a grown man sobbing over a guitar.

"Wil, man. It's just a string, we can fix it," Tommy tried, and Wilbur *glared*.

"Fuck off, Tommy! I didn't even want to *play*," Wilbur stood, towering over Tommy, and the guitar clattered to the floor. Tommy winced when he saw the bridge pop off the body. "I didn't want to play but you *asked*, so I played anyway, and now it's fucking broken! It's fucking broken and it's your fucking fault! If you weren't so fucking annoying it wouldn't have broke in the first place!" Tommy saw Techno round the corner, looking furious. Tommy bit back the bitter remark on his tongue. Wilbur was upset, but it wasn't actually at him. He knew Wilbur was just trying to pull other people down with him and he wasn't going to rise to the bait.

"Wilbur! Quit yelling at the kid, it's a fucking guitar!" He snapped from the bottom of the stairs, stomping up them.

"Don't. Don't yell at him." Tommy forced out. "It's okay. Stay there, Tech."

“No! Don’t defend him! He’s acting like a brat because he’s hungover and in a bad mood! He has *no right* to-”

“Technoblade,” Tommy snapped, voice raising in volume. “Stop talking.” To his surprise, Techno did. He froze in place as if he were on pause, mouth gaping open.

“Don’t fucking yell at him!” Wilbur screeched. “I hate when you do that. Who the hell do you think you are! You’re a fucking kid! Stop acting all high and mighty! Jesus Christ, if you’re going to be such a prick, just leave! We don’t want you here anyway!” Wilbur snatched up his guitar and slipped into his room, slamming the door behind him. The entire house was silent. Techno was still frozen on the stairs, Tommy still on the floor, and Wilbur, unknown to the other two, was collapsed just inside the door, silently heaving out choked sobs.

Tommy scrambled to his feet, and Techno backed down the stairs, still looking shell-shocked. Tommy looked between him and Wilbur’s door, and turned and went into the bedroom he didn’t quite call his own. He didn’t slam the door, just softly closed it and sank into the bed. His hands were shaking, and he was crying, telling himself that it didn’t matter what they wanted, that he could go on his own terms. He’d gotten too comfortable in this house, too many quiet nights where the four of them would sit at dinner and chat playfully. There hadn’t been many punishments, only once was he told off for not eating since that first time, and Techno brought him food the next day, so he’d hardly had a chance to be hungry before it was over. From the bed, he could hear Techno downstairs, talking to someone, probably Phil, on the phone and begging them to come home. Phil had only been gone for an hour, gone out to grab some groceries, and came home to Techno crying, Wilbur angry, and Tommy completely unresponsive.

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Five days passed and Tommy and Wilbur had not spoken a single word to each other. Wil and Techno had made up that first night, and Techno had said hello to Tommy in the mornings, but everything was stilted and awkward. Dinners were silent, almost morbid, affairs. Tommy had opted to walk to Phil’s house from school on Wednesday, declining Tubbo’s offer to ride with him and Eret. Tommy pretended like everything was fine, at school, but at Phil’s, he’d packed most of his clothes. It was as clear a sign as any that he understood what was going to

happen, but nobody asked him about it. It was likely they didn't see, the only one who ever really saw the room was Techno when he'd check on him, but it was hard to say if he could even tell that the room was packed away in the dark.

He'd stuck any and all personal trinkets in duffle bags, taken his posters down, and braced for the news that George would be on his way. It stung like acid when he left the record player Wil had given him outside Wilbur's room, but he did it anyway, and the next morning it was gone from the hallway. Neither of them acknowledged it.

Tommy rode with Technoblade on Thursday, and he kept his headphones on the entire time. He walked Friday. If his coworkers were concerned, they didn't mention it to him. Wilbur did not tell Phil that Tommy had a job. Tommy pointedly ignored Wilbur's face when he'd make tea and set a cup on the table for Wil. Refused to say a word when Wilbur would climb out onto the roof and chain smoke for hours. Kept himself from sitting down and helping when Wilbur sat at the table working on homework well into the morning. Anything he could do to detach from him.

Wilbur bit back tears every time Tommy did something nice for him. Every cup of tea made exactly how he liked it tasted like ash when it wasn't accompanied by a sarcastic remark. On day three Tommy didn't say anything, but when Wil fell asleep at the dining table, he'd woken up with his head on a pillow and a blanket draped over him, and both Techno and Dad had sworn it wasn't them. When Tommy's record player was left outside his door he had to leave the house so they wouldn't hear him cry. The guilt was eating at him, but whether it was pride or fear, he couldn't bring himself to say *anything* to Tommy. Any attempt died before it ever reached his lips. Every time they were in the same room Tommy's face was shuttered off, cold indifference to anything that was happening around him.

When he'd arrived at the school Wednesday, Eret and Tubbo said Tommy had decided to walk. He'd sat in his therapist's office and cried without saying much the whole session. He saw Tommy leave the school on Friday, look him in the eye, and walk anyway. Saturday, Wilbur decided, he would make breakfast as an apology, and beg his brother to just *smile at him again*.

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Saturday, Tommy woke to the smell of smoke. There was no smoke alarm, Techno had told him it had been broken for nearly a year, so there was no high-pitched shriek to warn anyone,

but the smell was unmistakable.

Tommy bolted down the stairs two at a time, stopping to open Wilbur's bedroom door only to find it empty, calling out for Wilbur and Techno as he went. His brain reminded him Phil was on a work trip, so he didn't stop to check his room. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he hesitated, wondering if it was better to make sure nobody was in the fire or to check if anyone was still asleep. He could see the orange, the glow of the fire from the kitchen, and smoke was filling every part of the ground floor, but he could faintly hear wheezing from the fire that was almost certainly Wilbur, so Tommy covered his face with his shirt and headed into the kitchen. The smoke stung his eyes, and his lungs were burning, but he moved toward the flames anyway, and he was glad he did. Wilbur was curled up on the floor, his breath coming in rattling wheezes and looking like he'd probably attempted to stop the flames but had succumbed to the smoke when his asthma reared its head. Tommy swore, moving forward to drag the man up. Ignoring the way the fire was burning his exposed arms, he carefully pulled Wilbur into a sitting position. His eyes were glassy, and he wasn't quite breathing, more like gasping for oxygen he couldn't find, but he seemed to be at least slightly aware of his surroundings.

Tommy pulled him towards the door, trying to call for Techno, but finding his own voice failing to come out above a panicked whisper. When he got Wilbur outside, he dropped him on the sidewalk, fishing around in Wil's hoodie pocket for the inhaler he *knew* Wil kept on him. Wil was still out of it, but he let Tommy pull him back into a sitting position and force the inhaler in his mouth. It took nearly ten minutes to get a Wilbur to focus, and when he seemed mostly lucid, all he croaked out was "Techno?"

Tommy swore, looking around for the pink-haired man, but couldn't see him anywhere. "Call the fire brigade. Call Phil. I'll get Techno," Tommy snapped, his voice rough but not wavering in the slightest. He gave Wilbur his phone and told him the password. The fire had spread quickly, the orange flames now visible in the living room windows and everything not aflame was dark with smoke. He wasn't sure why Techno hadn't gotten out, the man was very observant, there was no way he could have missed the heat and smoke filling the house, but Tommy wasn't thinking clearly enough to realize something was off, chalking it up to Techno's negative experiences with fire leaving him unable to maneuver through it.

Tommy made it to his feet and was back in the house, trying to avoid the flames that were eating everything around him. He made it to Techno's door, but his head was already spinning. He didn't knock, throwing it open and calling out, but there was no response. He swore and turned to leave the room, but the living room had become completely engulfed in fire. He could feel his heart pounding, could feel his lungs screaming in protest as he tried to move around the heat that was blistering his skin and melting his clothes. It *hurt*. The burns were bright red, and bits were turning black where the ash was sticking to him. He pushed



through, into the bathroom, which was empty, then into the downstairs study, which was empty, too. His head was pounding as he made it back upstairs, checking those rooms, but Techno wasn't there either.

He couldn't feel his hands, and his legs felt like lead as he dragged himself back downstairs, calling for his foster brother. He just faintly heard a whimper, and tried to find the source before he realized it was coming from him. There was no way Techno could be hiding and not show some signs of being there, but he checked every closet anyway, swearing when he couldn't find him.

He felt light, now. Like he was floating. He considered trying to make it to the door, but it felt like failure, leaving someone behind, so he kept searching. He could faintly hear sirens, now, but it was too far away, muffled as if he were listening with pillows covering his ears. He pushed open another door, an out-of-the-way storage closet that was rarely used, and his legs gave out from under him. He hadn't found Techno, but he couldn't get himself to stand back up. He couldn't feel the flames that were creeping around him, singeing his clothes and hair, couldn't feel his skin burn as he lost consciousness.

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Wilbur was still on the sidewalk, heaving breaths and trying desperately to call Phil. He could hear the sirens of the firetrucks and ambulances, but he still wasn't getting enough air. When his call went to voicemail, *again*, he screamed in frustration. Tommy wasn't back yet, and Wilbur didn't know where Techno was, and he could feel himself panicking.

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The paramedics gave Wilbur an oxygen mask and set him in the back of an ambulance, but they weren't *listening* to him.

"Please, my brothers are in there, someone has to-" Wilbur saw Techno's car come careening around the corner, and his throat closed. Techno hadn't mentioned leaving, and Wilbur hadn't even noticed his car wasn't in the drive. Which meant Tommy had gone to save someone who wasn't even *there*, and he hadn't come back out. Techno parked the car in the middle of the street, running toward them in panic, ignoring the neighbors that were on their porches, watching in awe as their home burned.

“Wilbur!” Techno shrieked, his hands coming up to cradle his brother’s face. “Wil, what *happened?*”

“I- I was trying to cook, but the oil started smoking, and I didn’t know what to do-” Wil cut himself off, coughing. “Tommy’s still in there,” He sobbed, grabbing his brother’s shirt “We didn’t know you’d left, he went back to get you and, and he’s *in there*, Tech. What if-what if he *dies* and the last thing I said to him was that we didn’t want him!”

“Tommy is going to be fine, Wil,” Techno said, but even he knew he sounded unsure. From the house, he could hear the cracking of fire, could hear things collapsing. “I’ll find out what’s going on, okay? Did you call Dad?”

“He didn’t answer! He didn’t answer and he’s going to come home and plan a funeral for a 17-year-old kid who doesn’t even know we love him!” Wilbur sobbing, breaths coming out in great heaves. “*I killed him. I killed him and told him I didn’t want him and he still died to save us.*”

“Tommy isn’t fucking dead! Stop saying that, he’s going to be fine! I’ll be back okay? Right-back, I promise.” Techno went to the firemen, who were all talking in panicked voices. Techno’s heart started pounding even harder at their grim expressions. They gave him a questioning look, and he grabbed the nearest firefighter and pointed at the house, not caring that he probably looked like a child. “Please, my brother is in there.” Techno choked out. The fireman nodded, a pinched look on his face.

“We know. We.. well, I don’t want to be morbid, but there’s not much of a chance of anything surviving that, kid.” The fireman winced. “They’re going in now, okay? But..”

“Tommy isn’t dead, you bastards! Save him!” The firemen looked at each other grimly, but the two who were suited up both sat a hand on his shoulders.

“We’re going to do our best.” And then they were gone, into the flames and out of view. A different fireman started talking to Techno softly, but Techno just focused on the front door, waiting for them to walk out with his brother.

“Where're your parents, kid? Who do we need to call?”

“My Dad, but he's not answering his phone. His name is Phil Watson.” Techno replied, not looking away from the house.

“What's your brother's name? The one in the ambulance.”

“Wilbur. Wilbur Watson.” Techno was still staring at the flames.

“And the one in the house?”

“Tommy. Thomas Shroud.” Something collapsed in the house and he could hear yelling from the men inside, but no Tommy.

“Okay. Tell me about Tommy. When they get him out of the house, what will paramedics need to know?”

“He's.. he's seventeen. He's not allergic to anything.”

“Any medical conditions?”

“I don't think so. He.. he has anxiety, he'll freak out and fight you if- when he wakes up. He'll probably hurt himself doing it.” When. When and *not if, because Tommy wasn't dead.*

“Okay. How tall is he?”

“Tall. Six one? Six two? He’s thin, too. Built like a noodle.” Techno’s hands were clenched around the hem of his shirt. The firemen were still inside.

“Okay, okay good. What’s your name, son?”

“It’s Technoblade. Watson. Why haven’t they come out yet?”

“The house is in bad shape. Wilbur said it was a grease fire that caught quickly. It looks like the house was made mostly of wood inside, right? There’s probably a lot of unstable ground.”

“But he’s *in there*, ” Techno argued. “He’s in there, with nobody to help him.”

“They’re going to find Tommy, Technoblade.” The firefighter assured.

“Alive?” Techno hated how small his voice was when he asked that.

“If he’s still alive now, we’ll do everything in our power to keep him that way.”

“He’s *seventeen*, ” Techno sobbed. The firefighter just winced and patted his back.

---

What the firemen came out with couldn’t have been Tommy. They were carrying something, though, and paramedics rushed toward them with a gurney, and Techno could hear them shouting, could hear them calling for oxygen, which meant whatever they carried out was *alive* , but Techno couldn’t believe it. The person they were putting in the ambulance looked like a corpse. No reactions, charred and bloody and so, so still. He heard Wilbur wail, calling for Tommy, but Techno was frozen in place. He couldn’t have spoken if he wanted to. They loaded him into the back, paramedics looking pale and grim, one of them shaking her head to the other before closing the door. The ambulance took off, and he could hear the firemen

telling him it was going to be okay and felt them lead him to Wilbur's ambulance. They were both in the back, and the door was shut, and they were off too. Techno squeezed Wilbur's hand tightly like he'd vanish if he let go, and they cried together.

---

The hospital wasn't really silent, but it felt that way. They weren't allowed to see Tommy, even after they cleared Wilbur to be discharged. Techno faintly heard doctors telling Wilbur he only had minor smoke inhalation and very minor burns, and that it could have been much, much worse. They told him he was *lucky*, like they didn't *know that* when they had another piece of them who *wasn't* lucky. When they knew their luck was actually a seventeen-year-old kid who'd carried Wil to safety, who'd gone back to save Techno, too, even when the house was collapsing around him. So they sat in the ICU waiting room, holding hands and desperately trying to get Phil to answer the phone, and tried not to think about how empty they would be if Tommy didn't come home.

When Phil finally answered his phone, Techno could barely find his voice.

*"Techno? What's up? I have like a hundred missed calls from you and Tommy."*

"Dad," Techno sobbed, gripping the cellphone like a lifeline. "Dad."

*"I'm here, I'm here. What's going on?"* Techno could hear Phil's panic.

"There was a fire. Wilbur and I are fine, but--"

*"Oh god, Tommy? Tell me Tommy is okay."*

"I--" Techno's voice broke. "I wasn't home, but they didn't know, and Tommy went in to get me. He- he got stuck in the house."

*“Oh my god. Is he-”*

“He’s alive, but... It’s really bad, Dad. They won’t let us see him now, but he looked *awful*.”

*“I’m on my way. Two hours away. Who’s there with you?”*

“Nobody. It’s just me and Wil.”

*“Call Clay. Maybe Schlatt or Niki so they can be with Wil. Let Tommy’s friends know what’s going on, but don’t let them come to the hospital, okay? I’ll be there soon. I love you.”*

“I- okay. I love you too.” The line went dead, and Techno texted Dream, Schlatt, Niki, and Ranboo to tell them there had been a fire. He asked Dream to come, and was only slightly surprised to find that he was apparently already on his way, and had picked up Wil’s friends as well. Ranboo said he and Tubbo were together, so Techno didn’t bother texting him, and he settled in his chair to wait.

Dream arrived with Niki and Schlatt in an amount of time that implied several traffic laws had been broken, and as soon as they made it into the waiting room, the three of them were holding the two brothers and telling them it would be okay, that Tommy would be fine. Dream didn’t hug Techno, just locking a hand around his wrist like they did when they were kids, and squeezed it lightly.

They tried to explain what happened, but when Techno tried to say how bad Tommy looked, Schlatt took it upon himself to end that train of thought before it left the station. He shook his head, moving on to something that really should have been more out of character for him, but was becoming increasingly common where the Watson kids were involved, comfort.

“The kid’s a fighter. He’ll wake up and threaten the nurses and be back to calling us all bitches in no time,” Schlatt reassured. Wilbur was halfway on Schlatt’s lap, still holding Techno’s hand, and his other hand was being held by Niki.

“It’s my fault,” Wilbur sobbed. “I did this to him.”

“No, it isn’t. If I’d told you I was going out-” Techno argued.

“It’s nobody’s fault,” Dream assured. “It was an accident. Tommy wouldn’t want you to blame yourselves.”

“But-”

“Dream is right, Wil. You would never hurt him on purpose. This wasn’t your fault,” Niki soothed, running her fingers through his hair.

“I already hurt him. I told him we didn’t want him, and now-”

“Tommy knows you didn’t mean it,” Schlatt argued. “The kid loves you just as much as you love him.”

“How would you know?” Wilbur glowered at his friend.

“Look at his phone.” Schlatt insisted, rolling his eyes at the suspicious look both Wil and Techno gave him. “No, seriously. Look at his Spotify, look at what books he has on his audible, or hell, look at his photos.” Wilbur hesitated, but when he opened Tommy’s phone, the background was the beach they’d gone to together. He opened Spotify, and his liked songs were all the songs Wilbur wrote, and all the ones he’d sent Tommy at three AM when he couldn’t sleep. When Techno watched Wilbur open audible, there were dozens of Greek tragedies, some half-finished but plenty completed.

“How did you know that?” Techno asked quietly.

“I *talk* to the kid. He wanders around town all the time, anyone who’s ever had a conversation with Tommy knows. He’ll tell anyone who listens about your music, and he’s listening to

those stupid greek stories all the time, apparently. That fucking menace kid brother of Eret's, Tubbo, complains about it constantly when I go to visit them, how Tommy talks about it in class and during lunch, and how he's painting Icarus in their art class like a nerd, how he got excited to learn about the actual Greeks in their Government class."

"I didn't know. I live with him and didn't know," Techno mumbled. "I don't know anything about him. I don't know what he likes."

"Apparently, he likes you," Schlatt joked half-heartedly. "Point is- Tommy knew- *knows*- that you care about him, and he cares about you." Techno pretended to not cry at that, while Wilbur openly sobbed into Schlatt's shirt.

They sat there, occasional words of comfort for what felt like hours, Dream sitting at Techno's feet, leaning on him just enough to keep Techno grounded but not enough to overwhelm him, as they waited for any news.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

Tommy wakes up because he is a big man and won't go down without a fight.

## Chapter Notes

TW for Final goodbyes! (He doesn't die, but they do genuinely think he will.)

Y'all didn't actually think I'd kill the kid off, did you? Please. He has so much more shit to do before this story is over.

If you could see the chapter names I have on my outline for this story I'm p sure you'd all beat me up.

Phil arrived before the news did. He came in and pulled his two sons into a hug, letting them explain what exactly had happened, before reassuring them that it wasn't their fault, and set off to find a nurse that could tell him what was going on.

He came back looking pale.

Wilbur and Techno shot to their feet, but Phil just waved them off, collapsing into a seat and staring at his hands.

“Dad?” Wilbur whimpered.

“There's... a lot of damage,” Phil mumbled. “They said none of it on its own would have been too bad, somehow, but combined...”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I.. well. They... They said they’ve lost him twice already, they don’t think they can bring him back if he goes a third time.” He wasn’t crying, but he wiped his eyes anyway. “If they can keep him alive through the night he should be in the clear, but...”

“But?” Techno prompted.

“Blade, sit down,” Dream said quietly, and Techno listened.

“But... the odds of him making it through the night are next to non-existent. They.. told me we should go say our goodbyes while he’s still somewhat stable.”

Wilbur’s grip was crushing Techno’s hand, but he didn’t complain. They followed Phil through the halls to the room, leaving their friends in the waiting room. They walked into the room hand in hand, but as soon as they could see Tommy Wilbur dropped Techno’s hand to cover his mouth, trying to cover the mournful cry he let out and tucked his face in Phil’s chest.

They sat silently in the room for ten minutes before Wilbur finally broke it. “I’m sorry, Toms,” he whispered. “I’m sorry for what I said, and I’m *sorry* I didn’t stop you from going back in the house. And *thank you*, for doing it, but I... god, wish you didn’t. I wish you would have gotten out, or I wish you would have left me in there, because if you go I don’t know what I’m going to *do without you*. I... we’ve only known each other for like 6 weeks but I don’t want to go back to the house without you. I don’t want to go back to only having one brother.” Wilbur sobbed, and Techno shook his head just a little and cleared his throat.

“I- thank you for trying to save me.” Techno had tears streaming down his face. “I wish I would have just told you I was leaving. I’m *so sorry that I didn’t*, Theseus.” He laughed a little, but it was bitter. “Just because you’ve always been the hero didn’t mean you needed- you don’t have to die like one.” The family winced at the word, but nobody cut him off. “Just come back, Toms, and I promise we’ll prove to you that you belong here. You didn’t have to prove you’re worthy of love, Tommy, we already know. If you weren’t we’d give it to you anyway. I’m sorry that we didn’t make that obvious from the start.” Wilbur muttered a few

more words too quiet to hear, but Phil stayed silent, just staring at his youngest child sadly, for a little while longer. When it felt like too much, he spoke up.

“Tech, why don’t you and Wilbur go out to the hall for a moment.” They both looked like they were going to protest, so Phil shot them a look. “Please. You can come back after.” Phil knew, somehow, that he was lying, but he prayed to any God that would listen that his sons didn’t. Someone must have listened, because they nodded, stepping out the door. Techno was completely obscured by the curtains, but Phil could see most of Wilbur still, so he spoke very, very quietly. “Tommy, I... I can’t thank you enough for what you did to protect them.

You shouldn’t have had to do it, but you did anyway, and I am *grateful*. I could tell, that first day, that you were exactly what we needed in our home, and I didn’t know why. It hurt, seeing you, and seeing myself in the way you held yourself. I know what it’s like to think you have to keep fighting, kiddo. I don’t believe you were only here to protect them, to protect us, but you did *anyway*. You’re seventeen, really just a child, but you shouldered the weight anyway, and there aren’t words to explain how proud I am, even if I wish you wouldn’t have. I know, *I know you’re still fighting, bud*, but you don’t have to. You’ve done what you could, soldier, and you can rest now. And... if you need to go, we can handle it. You don’t have to keep being strong.” Phil could see the faces of his own men when he closed his eyes, still fighting after the war had been won. Could see the ones who never got to go home. “It’s okay.” Phil was so caught up in the memories of gunshots and his own mistakes to hear the way the heart monitor started to pick up the pace, so when he heard a voice from the bed, he almost thought he was hallucinating.

“Phil?”

“Tommy? Toms, can you hear me?”

“Te- Technoblade. Is... did...?” The voice wasn’t Tommy’s, too small, and scared, and painful to be his, but it did come from him. Phil could hear the doctors calling for nurses, could hear them coming into the room in a panic, calling for a sedative because Tommy should not have been awake, it shouldn’t have been possible, but Phil ignored them and smiled a little at Tommy, even knowing the kid couldn’t see him.

“Tech is fine, Toms. You saved him. You saved them both. They’re going to be just fine.” Phil couldn’t bring himself to tell Tommy Techno wasn’t in the house. He didn’t need to

know. Tommy's heart monitor was erratic, and Phil knew what that meant. He ignored the calls of the medics around him.

"Oh, good. That's... good." Tommy whispered. "I... I don't remember-" his voice slurred off as the heart monitor screeched.

"It's okay, Tommy." Phil couldn't stop the tears anymore. "You're okay." He knew the nurses were keeping the boys out of the room. He could faintly tell they were trying to get him to leave the room too, but he fought them off. "He's my *son*, *I can't leave him*," He sobbed as they pulled him back from the bed. When the rapid beeping went still, Phil hit the floor on his knees. "*I don't want him to go alone*."

The doctors were trying to bring him back, he knew they were, but when they finally pulled him out of the room he could tell nobody thought they could. He didn't stay on his feet long, pulling his two older children into his arms the second the nurses let go of him, and roughly holding them as they all knelt in the waiting room, mourning.

The other people in the waiting room watched silently. The nurses looked away, their own eyes damp. An older woman sat, watching them with a look that wasn't pity but was something close. Dream, Niki, and Schlatt were crying, but they kept their distance.

Time passed, but the family didn't move until a doctor finally came in. "Family of Thomas Simons?" He asked, but his eyes were trained on them already. They braced for an apology, for the inevitable 'I'm sorry for your loss,' but when they looked the doctor in the eye he looked almost amused. "That's one hell of a kid you lot have." He smiled. Have. Present tense. The weight of the room lifted into something not unlike hopefulness. "He's probably *still* fighting the sedation, he's really giving the nurses a run for their money."

"He's alive." Phil breathed for what felt like the first time.

"He sure is. They've got him mostly back under, now, stable again, but we were all almost expecting him to completely refuse it. The kid's got a will like a mule."

“Stubborn bastard.” Phil laughed, voice watery. “They told us... they said if he went again...”

“By all means, they shouldn’t have been able to bring him back, but whether it was spite or you all just having Someone on your side, he pulled through,” the doctor explained. “But he’s not out of the woods yet. He has pretty extensive burns down his entire left side, and his right isn’t in much better shape. Three cracked ribs, lungs full of ash, and it’s hard to tell what kind of damage the kid’s brain went through having such little oxygen for as long as he did.”

“He spoke when he woke up,” Phil said, glancing at Techno. “He asked after his brother.” The doctor’s eyebrows shot up at that.

“That’s... well, I’d call it impossible if I hadn’t watched the kid come back from the dead ten minutes ago. It’s a good sign that he’ll recover. The kid’s an enigma, that’s for sure. I’m not supposed to say this, not with a case so volatile, but if you want my professional opinion? Tom is going to be just fine.”

When the doctor left, Techno spoke up to fill the silence.

“You talked to him?”

“Only barely. He asked if you were okay, and I told him you were. That you both were.” Phil sighed. “I don’t know why I’m surprised, honestly. He did tell us he’d do whatever he wanted regardless of what he was expected to do.” Wilbur shifted guiltily next to him.

“Tommy has a job.” Techno looked shocked, but Phil just huffed out a laugh.

“I’m not surprised. I suspected he was leaving at night, but I didn’t want to scare him by asking about it.”

“You knew?”

“No. I didn’t know where he was going, but he’s a good kid and I was pretty confident he wasn’t out getting drunk or high or vandalizing anything, so I let it be.”

“You just let him sneak out every night? What if he got hurt?” Techno demanded.

“Tommy is seventeen. He’s not an adult, but he is old enough to have his secrets. Just like Wil and the cigarettes he’s been smoking for years.” Wilbur flushed red at that. “I’m not your prison warden. I can’t keep you locked up and protected from everything the world throws at you. I have to let you, all of you, make bad decisions on your own sometimes, no matter how much I wish you’d not.” Phil gave them a small smile. “Mistakes are how you grow. Though for the record, Wilbur, picking up a smoking habit with asthma is pretty stupid.”

“I’m going to quit. If I never smell smoke again it’ll be too soon.”

“Oh, on that note, you’re never allowed to cook again,” Techno deadpanned, and the three of them laughed at that. Not happy, but hopeful, which was almost as good.

—

The first time Tommy woke up, he could hear Phil’s voice. He couldn’t make out completely what was being said, but he knew he was speaking to him. He couldn’t be bothered to care, instead asking what was plaguing his thoughts. Had Technoblade made it out? Was Wilbur okay? Tommy was almost certain he’d gotten Wil out fine, but everything after was fuzzy. He tried asking.

“Phil?” The man was speaking again.

“Tommy? Toms, can you hear me?” Obviously, he could hear him, how else would he know it was Phil? He didn’t have the energy to snap at him.

“Te- Technoblade. Is... did...?” The questions died on his tongue. Was he too late?

“Tech is fine, Toms. You saved him. You saved them both. They’re going to be just fine.” Tommy could hear the hesitation but chose to believe the words anyway. Everything hurt. He could hear something beeping loudly next to him, but he couldn’t bring himself to open his eyes.

“Oh, good. That’s... good,” Tommy whispered. “I... I don’t remember-” any energy he had was leaving him as the pain got worse. He wanted to scream, but it burned too much to make a noise, and he could feel his heart pounding in his chest, but then... he didn’t anymore.

Everything was white. Too bright, almost blinding. The pain was gone, but so was everything else. No strain in his muscles, no exhaustion looming just behind him. He couldn’t move, really, feeling more like he was floating than anything else. He tried to call out, but he found he couldn’t make a sound. He was so, so comfortable like this, and he started to relax. Maybe it would be okay to just sleep, for a while.

*“It’s not time for you to rest yet, little bird,”* A soft melodic voice called to him. *“You have fought long and hard, and you will get your rest, but not today.”* Tommy couldn’t verbally respond, so he just thought towards the voice and hoped she could hear him.

‘Are you God? Am I dead?’ The voice laughed.

*“No, little bird. I’m not a god. As for if you’re dead... the answer is a little more complex. You were hurt very badly, do you remember?”* Tommy did, but only barely. He said as such. *“You are dying, now. But you can’t stay here. You need to go home. Your family needs you.”*

‘I don’t have a family.’

*“Of course you do. One quite numerous, if I do say so myself. How many lives have you touched, Thomas, how many have you saved at the expense of yourself? Your family is all the people whose tears you’ve dried, everyone whose soul you pulled back from the edge of*

*despair just because you couldn't stand to see them hurt. Your family is waiting for you to wake up."*

'I did what had to be done, I didn't do anything special.'

*"Little bird, you see yourself so poorly. That is okay. In time, you will see what the rest of them see. You will see your kindness for what it really is."* Tommy wanted to keep arguing, but the light was fading back into darkness, and the voice was gone.

Tommy was back in the real world, and the pain was there again. Voices he didn't recognize shouting for sedation but all sounding almost relieved.

"Tommy, please let us help you, go to sleep." A voice spoke to him, but it wasn't as nice as the voice in the white. Or maybe it was. The memory was already fading as he struggled to stay conscious despite the agony tearing through him. "It's okay, sweetheart. Let the medicine work." Tommy wanted to fight, but he was so, so tired, so he let himself fall back into nothingness.

He woke again to Wilbur's voice singing softly. Someone was holding his hand very gently. He was still in pain, but it felt muffled, now. Not quite like healing but like it was being forced down. He forced himself to speak. "Wilbur?" His voice came out small, much smaller than he'd want, but Wil heard him anyway. Whoever was holding his hand squeezed lightly.

"Tommy? Oh god, you're awake, thank god,"

"I'm sorry," Tommy cried, trying to express his regret through more than just words. "I'm so sorry I-"

"You have nothing to apologize for, Toms. I'm sorry I yelled at you, I shouldn't have. It wasn't your fault and you were just trying to help and I snapped. I didn't mean it, Tommy. Never. I'd never send you away, I'd never let you go. I love you, Toms, I'm so sorry I-"



“Wilbur, stop being a bitch,” Tommy chastised, trying to smile but probably mostly grimacing. The room was dead silent for nearly 30 seconds before there was manic laughter coming from three directions. Techno, who was the one holding his hand, let go to cross his arms on the bed and bury his face in them, shaking with unrestrained laughter. Phil nearly doubled over in his chair, tears rolling down his cheek for what had to have been the hundredth time in the last week of sitting in this hospital room. Wilbur’s eyes were wide, his shoulders shaking as he giggled but tried to hide it. Tommy glanced at the three of them before shaking his head just very slightly, ignoring the way it shot pain down his body. “You three look like shit.” When the room broke out into giggles again, Tommy let himself sink back into the pillow. He let the gentle voices of Phil, Techno, and Wilbur lull him back to sleep.

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

Tommy talks. His not quite family hate to listen.

## Chapter Notes

Lmao, I just want y'all to know the comments on this fic are absolutely sending me. Every "Fuck you" Comment fuels my dead heart.

No, but seriously, thank y'all for the love, I appreciate it so much. I'm sorry I can't reply to all of y'all, but I read every comment and appreciate you!

Hospitals, Tommy decided, were the worst buildings to exist ever. It only took him roughly four days of being awake before being in bed became the worst torture he could imagine. The bed was not comfortable, he wasn't allowed to stand, or *sit up*, and the nurses all treated him like a baby. That last one wasn't actually true, but it *felt* true.

"Tom, I'm just checking your burns, stop *wiggling*." The nurse whose name Tommy refused to remember scolded.

"It *hurts*," Tommy whined for the twelfth time.

"Well that's what happens when you take a nap in a house fire," She laughed, tapping his nose. "Well, it's not infected at least," She sighed. Tommy knew that meant that it still wasn't healing at all, which he could have told them, because it still hurt exactly the same. Wilbur, Techno, and Phil were somewhere downstairs getting food, and Tubbo and Ranboo were in class, which Tommy was envious of. He missed learning, even if it was usually boring and at least a little inaccurate. But mostly, Tommy felt lonely. He got nervous the second he was left alone, worried that someone could be getting hurt and he couldn't do anything from his bed.

“Am I just going to be open burns forever? Gonna have to live in a bubble and wrapped in bandages for the rest of my days?”

“Don’t be dramatic,” She sighed. “Your body is recovering a lot of things at once right now, the burns probably aren’t a priority to your immune system.”

“The rest of me is fine! If my skin didn’t look like I’d been broiled I’d be good as new!”

“Tom, you have three broken ribs.”

“I stand entirely by what I said.” She laughed at that, checking his IV.

“Those brothers of yours are so polite, what on earth happened with you?” Tommy stiffened, just slightly, but then he laughed quietly.

“Believe or not, I’m the good child.”

“That explains why your father looks so tired then,” the nurse deadpanned.

“Hey! You have to be nice to me, I’m *hurt!*”

“It is nowhere in my contract that I have to be nice to you.” Tommy was going to argue more, but Wil came back into the room with a cup of coffee and a smile and Tommy’s whining died in his throat.

“Hey, Toms. How are you feeling?” Wil asked quietly. Wilbur had been quiet for days, and it was driving Tommy *insane*.

“Feeling exactly the same as I was an hour ago when you asked, bud.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Tommy bit back the ‘act like yourself’ that threatened to bubble up.

“Will you burn down the hospital if I ask you to sing?” Tommy joked, even though it felt feeble. The nurse barked out a laugh and tried to hide it with a cough.

“Sorry, sorry. That was just so brutal,” She giggled. “How on earth are you the good child?”

“Well I *didn’t* burn down the house, so in fairness, the bar was kind of on the floor,” Tommy teased. Wilbur had a small smile, but Tommy could tell the guilt was still eating at him. “Wil, you gotta stop looking at me like I’m dead. I’m not even dying anymore!”

“You wouldn’t be in here at all if I wasn’t such an asshole.”

“Wilbur you were literally making me breakfast. What a dick move, really.” The nurse gave Tommy a lightly scolding look, patted Wilbur’s shoulder, and stepped out of the room. When she was gone, Wil started wringing his hands.

“Why don’t you hate me?” He asked, his voice small. “If anyone deserves it, it’s me.”

“Did you tell me to go back into the house?”

“Well, no, but-”

“Did you intend to start the fire?”

“Of course not! But-”

“Was it ever your intention, even for a second, to let me burn?”

“No! No of course it wasn’t, but-”

“Then what do I have to hate you for, Wilbur? You didn’t do what you did on purpose. What’s the point in me being mad at you for a mistake? It’s not like I haven’t made mistakes.”

“You went into a fire to save Techno without hesitating.”

“I did.”

“Are.. aren’t you disappointed that I didn’t do the same for you?” Tommy’s blood ran cold at the question.

“No. God, Wil. You would have *died*. I’d never expect you to risk your life for mine.”

“You did. You walked into a kitchen that was on fire to drag me out, even after I was awful to you. You went back in because *I* asked about Tech. You would have seen his car wasn’t in the driveway if you’d been outside a little longer, but I scared you and you went back in to save him, and he wasn’t even there.”

When Tommy had been deemed out of the woods, they told him that Techno wasn't in the house. They were all surprised when Tommy’s reply was just ‘thank god, I didn’t want him to see that.’

“Wilbur. Going into the house wasn’t your fault any more than Techno’s or Phil’s. *I* chose to go in. You couldn’t have stopped me. I would have gone in anyway.”

“Why? Why risk your life for us?” Tommy didn’t answer for a long time.

“Because... you were worth it. I don’t regret it. I knew you were in the flames when I pulled you out. I believed just as much that Techno was in there. There wasn’t another option. If it was in my power to get you out, of course, I would. If I was put in the same situation, I would make the same choices a thousand times over.”

“You could have died.”

“I know. I *did* die. I don’t care. I’d do it again. As many times as I need to. I would burn another hundred times just to make sure you didn’t. To make sure none of you had to.”

“But *why*? You tell us we aren’t a family, right? If you believe that, *honestly* believe that, why put yourself through that?”

“Because that’s what I’m for,” Tommy sighed. “That’s what I’m here for, Wil. You and Tech? You’re going to be great. You’re going to... to change the world. Phil already has, because he *raised you*, Phil already changed the world and he will keep changing it because he’s fucking Phil and he’s a better man than most. You all have a purpose beyond who you are now. But me? I’m just here to keep you safe. Not just you. The houses I’ve been to, I was there for a reason. Sometimes it was just to put band-aids on scraped knees. Sometimes it was more than that, sometimes I was there to show people their true colors.” Tommy thought of Margaret. “Sometimes I was there to show people what really matters. But I’m not here to change the world, Wil. I’m here to prove to you that you can.”

“Bullshit.” Techno snapped from the doorway. Wilbur was crying. Phil was behind Techno and he looked pale.

“It’s not-”

“Yes, it is. You’re not here to *suffer*, Theseus,” Techno snapped.

“I’m not suffering. I’m happy to do it. As many times as I need.”

“You shouldn’t be! You’re seventeen years old! You shouldn’t feel like you have to be the fucking hero! You’re worth more than what you can do for other people.”

“You don’t get it,” Tommy snapped.

“I do,” Phil said, quietly. “I do get it. Feeling like all you are is who someone needs you to be.”

“It’s different,” Tommy assured. “You might have *thought* that’s what you were for, but you were more than that.”

“You’re more than this, too, Tommy.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then help us to. Tell us what you’re thinking.”

“I... before, I was angry. I used to be *so* angry. Angry at the world for making me suffer, for making me fight these battles. But I learned. I learned the lessons I needed to be taught. What *I* went through made me strong. It made me stronger than I was because I *needed* to be stronger. I needed to be stronger than I was because it was preparing me for this, for everything that happened after and everything that will happen next.”

“You were a child. You still are. You didn’t need to be strong, you needed to be *safe*. You should have been safe. You should never have been forced to go through what you did. But even if you’re never strong again, Tommy, you’re still worth something. If you never save another life, if you never win another battle, you will *continue to be worth it*. You don’t need to keep proving yourself, mate. You made your point.”

“I’m no more a child than you are, Phil. You could tell from the second I stepped foot in your house. Techno, you saw it too.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Techno said, looking at his dad with questioning eyes.

“ ‘ *You’ve done what you could, soldier, and you can rest now.* ’ ” Tommy quoted. “But I haven’t done all I can yet. I can’t *rest* yet.” Wil and Tech looked at their dad in mild horror. Phil looked nauseous.

“You heard me?”

“I did. I didn’t remember at first, but I heard all of it. I’ve never been good at listening much, so it’s no surprise I ignored you, but I did hear.”

“I… you know I wasn’t saying that because I wanted you to-”

“I know. But it doesn’t matter, does it? Because you know what my purpose is.”

“You’re twisting my words, I-“

“I know. I know you told me it *wasn’t* my purpose, but you weren’t saying that because you believed it, Phil. You were saying it because you thought it was what I needed to hear.”

“Tommy,”

“It’s okay. You don’t need to apologize, you don’t need to feel guilty about it. I appreciate it, what you said. I needed to hear it. I almost listened, too. I wasn’t going to keep fighting. I was relieved, to be able to rest. But something told me It wasn’t time to lay down yet, so here I am.”

“Tommy, I said those things because we were told you wouldn’t make it through the night. You’re right, that I said them because it was what I thought you needed to hear, but that



doesn't mean it wasn't true. I wanted it to be easy on you, sure, Because if there was any chance that you were holding on just because you didn't think you'd suffered enough, I wanted to relieve you of that burden." Tommy wanted to respond, was trying to think of something to say, anything would be better than the heavy silence hanging over them. He was saved from forcing himself to speak when a nurse came in pushing a cart.

"Hey fellas. I've gotta change some bandages, do you three mind steppin' out real quick?" They smiled at the three. "I'll just be a moment."

—

The three sat in the waiting room, anger radiating off the younger two in waves.

"Boys—"

"That's why you told us to leave the room? So you could, what? Tell Tommy he could die? Give him *permission*? " Wilbur hissed. "You watched us beg him to stay and then just *let him go*?"

"Wilbur, I,"

"You what? What could you possibly say to defend that? What if he would have actually died, *Phil*? " Techno hissed the name like it was a curse. "What then?"

"Then I would have dealt with it." Phil snapped. "What else could I have done?" Wilbur laughed incredulously.

"Do you even care? What else did you say?"

"I... I told him I was grateful for what he did. I told him I was proud of him. And when he was dying, I lied to his face and told him he was going to be okay." Phil snapped. "And he

was okay, sure, but it was a lie anyway because he *shouldn't have been*. And if those were the last words I spoke to him they would have haunted my fucking dreams until I died, hell, they still might, but I said them anyway because it doesn't *matter* what I want, or what you two wanted. If he was going, he shouldn't have had to feel *guilty about it*. ” His older sons just stared at him in shock. “Do you honestly think, either of you, that I told him he could go because I wanted him to? Of course, I wanted to beg him to stay, but it doesn't matter what I wanted, or what *you two* wanted. We can't be so selfish as to force a dying kid to stay just because we couldn't bear to see him go. He's here, which is a fucking miracle in and of itself, but if... if he was only still alive to make sure you two were okay, I wanted to make it easy for him. I wanted to comfort him. God knows the kid deserves some comfort.”

“Dad... I...” Wilbur whimpered. “I'm sorry.”

“I am too. It was... unfair of us to assume you didn't care.”

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. But... I didn't want it weighing on you lot too.” Phil's shoulders sagged. “It's too heavy of a weight to leave on your shoulders. It's too much to ask of you now, but here I am, letting you share it anyway.”

“But Tommy is going to be fine, Dad.”

“Tommy... is going to live, yes. But I don't think fine is the right adjective. Tommy is a fighter, he's going to put on a brave face, he's doing it now, already, but... I don't think he's going to be actually fine for a very long time.”

“Well, we'll just have to be there for him until he is,” Wilbur shrugged. “Together.”

“Together.”

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Summary

Tommy leaves the hospital

## Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took 1000 years to get out (Or yknow, 2 days. whatever.) I've been working 13-hour shifts every day. I am Tired (TM)

So Anyway, How about that lore stream? Anyone else crying?

Recovery was slow. Even Tommy's most mild burns took much longer to heal than they should have, so the spots worst affected, a patch on his left calf and his left forearm that the doctors had considered grafting skin to were barely showing signs of improvement. At three weeks after the fire, Tommy was still red and blistered almost all over, but he was *finally* being allowed to leave the hospital, even if he had to return every day for another three weeks minimum for them to monitor the healing process. Now he just had to deal with the gentle way Wilbur, Techno, and Phil were treating him. Like he was *fragile*. Phil had found them a short-term house to rent while he looked for a new home, on the other side of town but close enough for their friends to still visit easily. They gave Tommy the downstairs bedroom, despite the fact Techno hated being on the top floor, completely ignoring Tommy's vehement protests since he didn't mind the top floor and also he was *fine*.

He had lost that argument, though, so now he was sitting on the bed, the few things of his that had been salvaged from the house the only things in the room besides a bed and small table. There weren't many things that were in the house that made it out. Phil said he'd found some files and home movies that weren't completely ruined in his office, a few books from the study, Tommy's blanket, and a few pictures from the upstairs hallway, but nearly everything else was burned or too smoke damaged to save.

Wilbur's guitar, too, had survived, only because it was in the shop being repaired at the time. Tommy had never been so relieved hearing the damn thing hadn't burned. If a broken string

had led to such a catastrophic series of events, he could hardly imagine what it being gone would have done.

Tommy was currently listening to Wilbur play bits and pieces from his current work in progress. He was sat on the floor next to the bed, facing away from Tommy, which seemed to be his default state lately. All three of them, actually. He'd noticed in the hospital, the way they all diverted their eyes whenever they spoke to him, or if they did look at him they'd immediately look away if he so much as shifted in discomfort. It was frustrating, but Tommy had made exactly one joke about it in the hospital, just a passing 'do I really look *that* bad' remark, and all three of them apologized so intensely that it sent his head spinning, so he didn't bring it up again. If he was being honest with himself, he understood where they were coming from. Since the fire, Tommy had only looked at his reflection once. Singed hair and the red blistering up his neck and onto his jaw were enough on their own to make him a little nauseous, but it was more than that, really. The circles under his eyes had been bad for ages, but they looked like bruises now, as if there was no amount of sleep he could get to rid himself of the exhaustion that settled in his bones. He looked older, like he'd aged 5 years in the three weeks since it had happened. He didn't know if any of that had improved since his first look, but he didn't want to find out.

Wilbur was playing quietly. He did everything quietly now. Tommy wondered idly if it was driving Techno insane. He had mentioned he hated the quiet, how did he feel now, when you could hear a pin drop even when they were all here. Though, Techno had been acting differently too. His often stilted and awkward attempts at expressing emotions were much more frequent. Tommy supposed seeing your home burn away with everything you owned inside would do that to you.

Phil was a different anomaly. He seemed almost totally normal, a little subdued but otherwise a near-perfect mimicry of the person he was a month ago. Tommy didn't know if Wil or Techno could see through it, but to Tommy, it was like the uncanny valley. He was just *slightly* off, so, so close to being right but missing the mark. It was obvious in the way he'd stop and think about every answer he gave, the way he had tripled his coffee intake, long nights at the table looking at houses, and early mornings spent on the phone with insurance agents. Tommy could tell a lot of the strain was financial. The downpayment on a new house would be a lot, and it was unlikely the man had ever intended on buying another home. Tommy bit his tongue, pretending like he didn't know what it meant when Phil opted to take on every bit of overtime at work, or when he opted to skip meals. Tommy had seen those strategies a million times in foster parents.

"Are you alright? You look a little spacey," Wilbur cut into Tommy's thoughts.

“Fine, yeah,” Tommy only half lied. His side hurt, and his leg was *throbbing* , but he didn’t want to freak him out.

“Are you sure? Do you want me to grab your pain meds? Some water?”

“I- yeah, actually. My pain meds would be good,” Tommy agreed. He didn’t like taking them, and really, he didn’t take them nearly often enough to be comfortable, but he hated the way they made him feel like he was floating. It felt just a touch too close to how he felt in the flames, only exacerbated but the ache in his lungs and the way his whole body constantly felt hot, like he’d gotten a terrible sunburn that aloe couldn’t soothe. Wilbur left the room and came back with the bottle and a glass of water.

“You gotta start telling us when it starts to hurt instead of waiting until it gets this bad, Toms,” Wilbur chastised when Tommy went to sit up and visibly recoiled in pain.

“I’m *fine*, ” Tommy hissed through grit teeth. “I’ll be fine, it’s just bugging me a little.” And he was, mostly. The first week any time his pain meds wore off the pain was blinding, making it entirely impossible to move. Now it was bearable, most of the time, even completely medication-free. It was uncomfortable, and *itchy*, but sitting still it was barely a dull ache. A minor distraction was all it took to put it out of mind. Moving was still proving difficult. He hadn’t walked much at all, no more than the 20 steps to the bathroom and back. He’d taken all of his meals in bed so far, and it seemed like his housemates had no intention of letting him eat at the table with them any time soon.

“Tommy, you have massive second-degree burns, multiple patches of actual or damn near third-degree burns, and broken ribs. It’s okay for you to not be fine.”

“Well, I’m fine, okay? Christ.”

“Toms,”

“Don’t you have homework or something to do?” Tommy snapped, already exhausted with the conversation. Wilbur’s mouth snapped closed and he sighed.

“I... yeah, I do. I’ll go do that,” He picked up his guitar and left the room, Tommy ignoring the guilt at the way his shoulders were slumped, leaving the door slightly cracked at Tommy’s request. It was his general signal that he wasn’t sleeping, and the only way he could hear what was going on in the rest of the house. The walls were much better insulated here than at the previous house. He was almost certain with the door closed he could scream and they wouldn’t be able to hear it unless they were actively pressing their ear against the door itself.

He wasn’t alone for long. He really never was. It was not uncommon for all three of the Watsons to be in his room at any given time. Less than ten minutes after Wil left, Techno knocked.

“You can come in,” Tommy said. The door creaked open.

“Hey, Theseus. How are you feeling?” Techno called Tommy Theseus a lot, now. Tommy had asked about it, but Techno just said it was ‘fitting’ and told Tommy he would stop if it bothered him. It didn’t, so he continued.

“Feeling okay. How was school?”

“Not too bad.” Techno sat on the edge of Tommy’s bed. “Wil looked a little upset, did something happen?”

“I asked him to leave,” Tommy admitted. “Well, kind of.”

“So something did happen? Did he do something?”

“No, not really. He’s just... a little overbearing. It gets to be a little overwhelming.”

“He’s worried about you.”

“I know, I just... wish he wouldn’t be, I guess. I’m fine.” Tech gave him an only slightly condescending smirk at that.

“Yeah, you look great, I can’t imagine why he’s worried.”

“I don’t like being taken care of, or *fretted* over.”

“Tommy. Cut the guy some slack, he thought he killed you.”

“But he *didn’t*. And even if I would have died it wouldn’t have been his fault. I was the dumbass who went back into the house,” Tommy groaned.

“It was *kind of* his fault. Just like it was kind of mine, and it was kind of yours. We all made mistakes that day.”

“No. It wasn’t either of your faults. It wasn’t anyone’s fault. Stop forcing the blame on yourselves.” This was a well-worn argument at this point.

“I mean,” Techno started with a grin on his face.

“No!” Tommy laughed. “Don’t start this again!” Techno huffed out a chuckle.

“Fine, fine. Dream wants to know if you’d be up for some visitors. He said he’d bring Tubbo. I think Schlatt wanted to see you too, but probably not until the weekend.”

“Dream and Tubbo can come, tell Schlatt I said to fuck off.” Techno shook his head.

“I don’t know why you pretend to hate him.”

“I’m not pretending! He *threatened* Tubbo once, you know.”

“Tubbo owed him like 50 dollars.”

“Oh my God, you’re a Schlatt apologist.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Techno rolled his eyes. Techno was the only one who would still tease him, even though it was very light. Tommy appreciated it. Techno glanced at his phone. “Dream said he’d be over in like 40 minutes.”

“Cool. How is that going, by the way?”

“How’s what going?”

“You and Dream. Spending time together again.”

“It’s... a little weird. We never really stopped talking, even if it was only superficial conversation, but seeing him constantly and talking to him feels off now. It’s been like 4 years since we were close, you know?”

“He’s good for you. I’m glad you’re making up.”

“...yeah, I am too. It took too much energy to be mad at him.”

They bantered for a little while, mostly Tommy teasing Techno and him only half matching his energy. When Dream and Tubbo arrived, they took up some of the slack. Tubbo was a little subdued, but still the most lively person Tommy had interacted with in what felt like ages, and Dream was acting about how he always did.



“Do you think stars people-gaze?” Tubbo asked while hanging upside-down off the bed.

“Tubbo what the actual fuck are you on about?”

“I have no idea. Do you think birds go people-watching?”

“Crows do,” Dream piped him from where he was leaning on Techno’s legs.

“Crows don’t count, they’re like, a special kind of bird.”

“Special how?”

“I don’t know. Too smart. They don’t people-watch. They people *observe*.” Everyone laughed at that. Tommy’s laugh devolved into coughing, which left him curled up, hugging his ribcage in pain. The laughing stopped pretty quickly. When Tommy finally uncurled, all three of them were watching him carefully, the same look of concern they always had when they were reminded that Tommy was still actively hurting.

“Fuck,” Tommy hissed. “This is fucking miserable.”

“Do you need anything?” Tubbo asked smally.

“No, no. Just... give me a second.” They all pretended to not hear his voice crack. Nobody mentioned the tears rolling down his face when he sat up.

“Do you think the fish who have hooks stuck in them are considered punk rock by the other fish?”

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After Dream and Tubbo left, Techno hung around. They were joined by Phil for dinner, but he left not long after to sleep. Tommy was in a slightly better mood after spending time with friends, grateful for the interaction he got so rarely now. Spending time with Wil, Techno, and Phil was fine, but Tommy always felt a little bit like a kid being babysat with them. Tubbo wasn't like that. Techno wasn't hovering now, instead softly reading aloud a book of myths, an activity that had started in the hospital and had continued once he got out. It felt very domestic. Tommy hadn't expected to like being read to, despite his enjoying audiobooks, so when Techno had first offered, he'd only accepted to placate the man. Now, he looked forward to it. It was, along with Wilbur playing his guitar, one of Tommy's favorite ways to pass time, though he'd never openly admit that. After finishing Icarus's tale, which was one of the few Tommy knew already, Techno closed the book, bid Tommy goodnight, and left the room.

It only took Tommy a few moments to fall asleep.

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Summary

Tubbo and Ranboo visit

## Chapter Notes

Short chapter because work is killing me and I'm very tired. Sorry y'all <3

After the initial month and a half of doctor visits and frustration, Tommy was glad for Phil's quick thinking when it came to school. He had explained the situation, and with the argument that Tommy could fail every final and still pass every class, the school had allowed him to exempt said finals and move on to his final year of school in the fall without issue. Tommy did not want to think about having to repeat a year, it would have thrown his entire plan off. It was now summer break, which meant a lot of things, but the primary one was that Ranboo and Tubbo were over *a lot*.

They were over now, actually, Tubbo laying on the floor while Ranboo sat in one of the three bean bag chairs Techno had put in the room so they weren't always piled on Tommy's bed. Tommy was moving around more now, getting up and walking around a bit without too much issue. He still hadn't attempted stairs, and if he stood for more than 10 minutes his left leg would scream in agony for hours after, but even so, he was relieved. Other than the worst of the burns, he was finally, *finally*, healing. Laying on his side was still impossible, and his lungs and ribs still ached just a bit, but it was progress. Tubbo was trying to get an old tablet of his to work.

"This is so annoying! I can't get it to light up!"

"Why not just ask Fundy to help? He's good at tech stuff, isn't he?" Tommy asked for what had to be the tenth time.

“Because Fundy is working all the time,” Tubbo pouted.

“Maybe something isn’t wired right?”

It’s running, though. It’s working, I just can’t see it.”

“I... this might sound stupid, but is the light burnt out? Like whatever backlights the screen?”

“Oh my goodness Tommy you’re a genius!” Tubbo grinned. “Well, kind of. But you’re right! The screen is probably fried!”

“Cool.”

Tubbo fiddled with it a little longer before putting it away and groaning.

“How do you live here, it’s so boring,” Tubbo whined.

“You don’t have to stay, Tubs.” Tommy gave him a small smile. “You guys can go hang out somewhere else.” Tommy ignored the anxious pang at the thought of his friends being out of his sight. ‘ *Clingy* ’, his mind supplied. He ignored it.

“No, I miss you. I just wish you weren’t hurt.”

“I’m getting better. We’ll be able to go out together soon.” Tubbo looked at Tommy, disbelief coloring his face.

“Tommy, don’t take this the wrong way but I don’t believe that for a second. Every time you stand up you look like you’re going to fall over.”

“That’s not true! Look!” Tommy stood, and Ranboo anxiously jumped up with his hands out, as if to catch him. He ignored the pain, walking back and forth across the room a few times. “Nearly good as new!”

“Tommy, sit down,” Ranboo chastised. “You’re in pain.”

“I’m fine, bitch! I’m a big man, strongest you’ve ever known!”

“Of course you are. Now please, sit.” Tommy pouted at that, but complied.

“I’m so sick of sitting,” He whined. “Wil and Techno won’t even let me walk to the kitchen without one of them trying to help.”

“Oh, yeah, how is that going by the way? Has Wilbur relaxed yet?”

Tommy’s friends had pretty much all heard of Tommy’s frustration with Wilbur. His quietness had been unending, even after Tommy told him time and time again that he was fine.

“No,” Tommy groaned. “He’s so *guilty*, all the time. I can’t even be in the same room with him for more than twenty minutes, he’s driving me nuts.”

“I mean, he did literally start the fire.” Tubbo shrugged.

“Don’t. It wasn’t his fault,” Tommy snapped. “He’s blaming himself enough as it is.”

“Look, I’m just saying. I get that you love your brother or something but that doesn’t mean he didn’t fuck up.”

“He was making me *breakfast!* And we’re not- fuck- he isn’t my brother.”

“He was making you breakfast after a week of not speaking to you because of a guitar string,” Tubbo rolled his eyes.

“I actually... don’t think why he wasn’t talking to me had anything to do with the guitar.” Tommy had told his friends the full story of the fight, he was just realizing. “During the screaming, Techno had come upstairs and was yelling at Wilbur for being upset and I kind of snapped at Techno. Wilbur didn’t like that much.”

“So, what, he was mad on Technoblade’s behalf?” Ranboo asked.

“No, no he wasn’t... he wasn’t really mad. He said something kind of shitty and I think it really screwed with him. It was probably just him being too embarrassed about what he said to talk to me about it,” Tommy shrugged. “It’s why he’s so fucked up now, I think, when they thought I was gonna die he thought his last words to me would have been... that.”

“What did he say?”

“Doesn’t matter. He didn’t mean it,” Tommy huffed out a laugh. “Besides, his actual last words to me would have been much funnier. Imagine having to explain at your brother’s funeral that your last word to him was your other brother’s name.”

“Wait, when did he say that?”

“Right after I got him out of the house,” Tommy explained. Ranboo looked confused.

“Wait, how’d you get him out if you were stuck inside?”

“I went back in to find Tech.”

“But Techno is fine, right? How’d he get out if you didn’t?”

“Oh, Techno wasn’t in the house, but we didn’t know that, at the time, so when we got out Wil asked for him and I told him I’d go get him.”

“He didn’t try to stop you?!” Tubbo cried, indignant.

“He could barely breathe and was in shock, it’s not his fault!”

“I don’t know, Tommy. It sounds a lot like several things were his fault in a row and you somehow think they cancel out.”

“It’s not that simple, Tubbo. You have to factor in the situational tone. The context.”

“The context of ‘he was hungover and yelled at you’ or the context of ‘he sent you back into a burning building to save his brother because apparently, he’s more important than you?’ Which context?” Tubbo sassed.

“I’m not going to explain to you why you shouldn’t be mad at someone for an accident that didn’t even involve you!”

“Okay. Let’s steer this away from the fighting, maybe?” Ranboo suggested. Tommy and Tubbo glared for a second more and then nodded, sinking down and relaxing. The conversation went back to normal after a few minutes and the fight was entirely forgotten half an hour later.

“So, has Phil made any decisions on a house yet?” Ranboo asked, tilting his head just slightly, looking just a bit like a curious puppy.

“No, I don’t think so. The down payment for a house is a massive amount of money upfront if you don’t want to be screwed over. I heard him talking to someone about it last night, he’s apparently like 10 grand away from having even the cheapest down payment he would need, even after the insurance money, unless he wants to dip into his retirement fund.”

“That sucks. Phil should just find a rich person and convince them he needs the money more than him,” Tubbo said, a small grin on his face. “I mean, I don’t think anyone else could just drop 10k for him, at least.”

It hit Tommy then, that *he* probably could loan Phil the money. It’d be a huge chunk of his car fund, which he’d been putting money into for years, saving 75% of every paycheck he’d gotten since he turned 12, but Tommy could always get a car loan later.

When Tubbo and Ranboo left, Tommy had made up his mind. It would be annoying, but if it *helped*, well, Tommy could deal. He pulled out his checkbook, something he wasn’t really sure why he’d even gotten in the first place, honestly, and with shaking hands made out the check.

When Phil got home from work, Tommy waited about an hour before texting him, asking him to come downstairs. Phil must have assumed something was seriously wrong because he looked *panicked* when he flung Tommy’s door open.

“Tommy? What’s going on? What can I do?”

“Woah, big man. Where’s the fire?” Tommy winced at his own joke. “Ugh, maybe I’ll table that phrase. Nothing is wrong, I just wanted to talk to you about something.” Phil visibly relaxed.

“Oh, oh okay. Nearly gave me a heart attack, kiddo.”

“Don’t relax yet, I might still give you one. I have something for you,” Tommy explained. Phil looked mildly suspicious. Tommy held out the check. “This is for you.” When Phil took



it, he stared at it blankly for a solid 10 seconds before shaking his head, trying to hand it back.

“Absolutely not.”

“I wasn’t asking, actually,” Tommy replied lightly. “You need money to buy a house, I am giving you that money.”

“Tommy, this is an asinine amount of money. I’m not accepting this.” Phil was looking bewildered.

“It’s nothing I can’t afford to give you,” Tommy said. It was only partially a lie. 15,000 dollars, a little more than half of his life savings, was a lot to drop in one shot, but he could do it and still have enough to get the apartment come next spring. “I know you don’t have enough to get a house, and you can’t stay here forever.” Phil looked a little pale. “It’s the least I can do, after all you’ve done for me. We... we haven’t known each other very long, but when push came to shove, you and your family took care of me when you didn’t have to. Let me help take care of you all in return.” He had never told any foster family that he had such extensive savings, but he was confident that Phil wouldn’t use the knowledge against him. He didn’t *trust* Phil, per se, but he could tell that he wasn’t that kind of person.

“Tommy, you don’t *owe us anything*. You never have to pay us for loving you.”

“That’s not what this is. It’s... a gift. You can pay me back later if it makes you feel better. When the insurance for the old house fully pays out and you’ve sold the property.” Tommy did not mention that since it would be more than a year at the least before that happened, he’d be long gone.

“This is *too much*,” Phil argued weakly, but Tommy could see his resolve crumbling.

“It’s arguably not enough. 15k looks like a lot of money, but between closing costs and taxes? You might still be short.” Phil looked like he was going to keep arguing, so Tommy cut him off. “Wil and Tech still have like 5 years of school each before they’re graduated. You want

to keep them with you until then, right? You can't do that if you don't have a home."  
Whatever fight Phil had in him died on his tongue.

"I'm going to pay you back. Every cent."

"Course you are. I'm going to hold you to it, old man."

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Summary

They're brothers. Even when they fight.

Looking at houses was an interesting experience. Tommy actually vetoed the first house they looked at, due to having no ground floor bedrooms. Techno insisted it was fine but Tommy had spent too many mornings finding Techno on the couch to believe him.

The second didn't have a yard. The third Wilbur hated before they'd even made it inside. The fourth, a five-bedroom two-story Victorian immediately was praised by Wilbur and Techno, and Phil seemed thrilled by it as well. Tommy wasn't really a huge fan, the floors too creaky and everything inside was *wood* which made him a little nervous, but he pretended like it was perfect too, because it didn't matter to him in the end. He only had to stay here 10 months at the most. Enough to graduate. Phil put an offer on it.

"I'll be glad to get out of this place," Wilbur admitted while sitting on the floor of the room Tommy stayed in. Tommy kept having to remind himself that it wasn't *his* room.

"Don't like it here?" Tommy asked, playing on his phone.

"It feels empty. I know the new place will too for a while, it's not like we have much by way of furniture right now, but at least it'll be ours, you know? Somewhere we can paint and decorate without worrying about getting a deposit back in."

"That's fair. You hoping for the Victorian?"

"Yeah. I like it."

“Cool,” Tommy replied, sitting up a bit. “I think it’ll be a good place for you.” Wilbur frowned at that.

“For *us*. ”

“Eh, I mean, I’ll only be there for another year tops. Once I graduate I’ll be leaving even if I don’t get kicked out by then.”

“You don’t have to-“

“Yeah, Wil, I know.”

They sat in silence for a beat before Wilbur started again. “Dad’s going to ask to adopt you. He was talking about it before this all happened, but once we get into the new house he’ll get the paperwork.”

“I’m not going to say yes. Even if... even if I considered you family, which I’m not saying I do, I don’t want to be adopted.”

“Why? Why not?”

“Family is more than a sheet of paper anyway. Adoption is just for legal reasons, and I’ll be 18 too soon for it to matter. It’ll be a waste of money and time.” Wilbur pouted, and Tommy gently kicked him. “Stop pouting. You’ll be glad to have me gone anyway. Less people to eat your snacks.”

“You can have all of them, I don’t care. We want you to stick around.”

“All of them? Even the Oreos?”

“Oh, you gremlin! I *knew* you took those!” Tommy laughed openly. “But yes, even my Oreos. We’d miss you if we only were able to talk through text most of the time.” Tommy did not mention that he probably wouldn’t text them.

“I’ll come visit for every other Christmas,” Tommy teased. “Every third Easter or something. I’ll send cards from all the cool places I visit.” He was lying through his teeth. He’d throw away his phone and lose their numbers before he made it out of the county.

“Birthdays too, you’ll have to visit for birthdays.”

“Of course, what kind of brother would I be if I didn’t irritate you for your birthday?” Tommy didn’t even register what he said until Wilbur turned to him with glassy eyes.

“Don’t say that, I will cry.” Tommy froze.

“What?”

“You said- I-“ Wilbur grinned. “Can I hug you?” He did not wait for an answer, carefully wrapping his lanky arms around Tommy and digging his face into his shoulder.

“What are you on about?”

“I can’t wait to tell Techno I’m the favorite brother. He’s gonna be pissed.”

“Excuse me?” Techno stuck his head in the door

“Tommy called me his brother first, therefore I am the favorite.” Tommy finally caught up with his own brain and turned bright red

“I- did *not* !”

“You did! Oh, this is so great, I’m the superior brother, get fucked, Tech!” Tommy pushed Wilbur off of him, still shocked.

“I-“

“Oh, whatever. We both know Tubbo is his favorite brother,” Techno shrugged, obviously picking up on Tommy’s panic.

“Fine, *second* favorite, then!” Wilbur grinned. “You aren’t taking this from me!” Tommy laughed softly as Techno sat down next to them on the bed, one on either side of him.

“Sure, bud. You can say that all you want, but we know who the real favorite is.” Tommy laughed at Techno’s haughty tone.

“You’re just mad because he said it to me first.”

“He only said it to you first because you never leave his side!”

“Which is why I’m the favorite!”

“Girls, girls, you’re both pretty,” Tommy chastised. “Good lord.”

“You’re my favorite brother too, Tommy,” Wilbur teased, leaning his head back on Tommy’s shoulder.

“Yeah, whatever, you sap.”

They sat together for several hours, just hanging out quietly in each other's company, and it felt *warm*. Tommy couldn't remember feeling like this with a foster family ever, feeling safe and comfortable and wanted. It was nice.

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It didn't last. As the summer dragged on, Tommy's ability to move about the house spread to him *leaving* the house, and it ultimately led to the fight he was in now.

"You could have *texted*! We were worried!"

"I told you I was leaving! It's not like I just vanished!"

"You were gone for *fifteen hours*! We didn't know where you were, or who you were with! You could have been dead, and we wouldn't have known!" Wilbur was mad. Tommy understood that, but he didn't care. He wasn't a child, and he was allowed to leave as he pleased.

"Why are you acting like such a bitch about this? You don't lose your mind when Techno leaves for the day!"

"Techno is an *adult*. You're a child who's hurt! Forgive me if I don't consider those the same!"

"I'm not a fucking child! And I wouldn't be hurt if it wasn't for *you* anyway!" Tommy regretted the words the second they left his mouth. "Wait- fuck, I didn't mean that." Wilbur had frozen, and guilt was evident on his face. "No, Wilbur, don't- it wasn't your fault. I shouldn't have said it, and I don't think that."

“No, you’re right. I hurt you, and I’m *sorry*, and I’m trying to make it up to you, but I can’t do that if you just *vanish* all day!”

“You have nothing to make up for! We’ve had this conversation a million times! It’s *fine*! You didn’t do anything wrong! I was just trying to hurt you, and we both know that! Quit feeling guilty for something that doesn’t matter anyway!”

“Doesn’t *matter*? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I- you know what I mean.”

“No, explain it to me.”

“It... it just doesn’t matter! Nobody that matters got hurt, you’re getting the new house and everything can be replaced! It’s fine!”

“Nobody who matters? *You* got hurt! You fucking *died*!”

“Who cares? It’s just me!” Wilbur’s face *crumpled*.

“Do you really think we don’t care?” His voice was quiet, solemn.

“I... I know you care, but it’s not like the way you would care if it were Tech or Phil. It’s different.”

“How? How is it different?”

“Because they’re your *real* family!” Tommy was annoyed that he had to explain this again. “Because your first concern when you made it out of a burning building was your brother,



you dense fuck! Because I'm *replaceable*, but they aren't! And they're fine, so it's fine!" Tommy swore under his breath. "Whatever. I'm leaving. I'll see you tomorrow or something." Wilbur grabbed his hand as he tried to leave, but he yanked his arm out of his grasp and slammed the front door on his way out. The summer air was warm, the humidity making the air sticky and thick.

Tommy realized three blocks from the house that he didn't have his phone, which was annoying. He could walk to Tubbo's house, but he didn't want to show up unannounced, so he headed toward the park instead. He ignored the protest in his leg as he stomped through the grass, heading toward the woods, hoping to avoid anyone. It wasn't too late, just past 7 pm, so there were still some people ambling around. He angrily wiped tears from his face and made it to the small stream he had found in his exploration a few days ago. He crossed it easily and continued, eventually finding a small field of wildflowers. He laid down in the tall grass and watched the clouds for a while, watching the sunset and the stars creep into the sky. He didn't know how long he'd been there, but it must've been hours. He had zoned out at some point, just watching the stars shift across the sky and slipping behind the clouds that were rolling in, hearing the sounds of the town die into nothing. Another hour passed before he heard the yelling.

"Tommy!" It sounded like Schlatt.

"Tommy, are you here?" That might have been Niki. He wanted to call back to them, but his voice caught in his throat. He heard their voices get further and further away, then they were gone, so quickly Tommy wondered if he imagined it. When it started raining, Tommy regretted not just going with them. It started lightly at first, but it quickly became a downpour. He stayed there, laying in the tall weeds staring at the sky as it soaked him to the bone. He wanted to get up, to walk back to the house and apologize, but he couldn't bring himself to stand. The rain brought wind with it, and the temperature dropped. He could feel himself shaking, the ground beneath him was turning to mud, but he just... *stayed*. He wasn't crying, he just felt empty, like he'd poured out his heart in the fight and left it on the floor when he left. He wondered if it would be better if he never got it back, if he never had to feel the guilt that ached in his bones. What good had his bleeding heart ever done? He stayed right where was, exhaustion bone-deep and too heavy to let him stand.

"He might not even be out here! He could be at a friend's house!" That was Techno. He sounded very close. Tommy could call out and be found.

"Which friend? All of his friends are out looking for him!" Wilbur's voice was even closer.

“I don’t know! He wouldn’t just-“ Techno’s voice cut off abruptly. “Oh, god, Wil! I found him!” Tommy didn’t know why he sounded so scared. He couldn’t move his head to look. “Tommy? Tommy, can you hear me?” Techno was kneeling next to him now, his hands on Tommy’s shoulders. “Tommy, please.” Why was he so loud? Tommy tried to push him off but found that his hands wouldn’t move. He tried to speak, but he couldn’t move his mouth. “Tommy, c’mon. Say something.” He was shaking him now, Tommy could feel his head loll to one side.

“Oh my god, what’s wrong with him?” Wilbur’s voice sounded too high. Tommy’s ears were ringing.

“I don’t know! Call Dad! Tommy, please. Just squeeze my hand.” Tommy hadn’t noticed Techno take his hand. He couldn’t bring his hand to move. Wilbur was talking now, but not to him, and Tommy couldn’t focus on the words.

Then Phil was there, doing the same. Gentle hands on his face, turning it towards the older man. “Toms, just look at me, please. C’mon. Give me a sign.” Tommy couldn’t see, his eyes blurred and unfocused. He wasn’t even sure he could blink. He felt himself being lifted, by who had to have been Phil, but he just ragdolled, completely unable to hold himself up. He was in a car, leaning against someone, and he still couldn’t bring himself to even speak. When they were back out the house he faintly could tell someone was removing his shirt, pulling on another one that felt dry and soft. He didn’t fight them as they wiped his face clean, didn’t argue when they laid him in a bed, or maybe on the couch. He couldn’t tell. His hands were tingling, but he still couldn’t bring himself to move them. When he finally gave way to sleep, he could hear people still talking to him.

—

Waking up hurt. His whole body felt like it was on fire. He could tell there were people in the room, but they weren’t speaking. He opened his mouth, trying and failing to form words, but the movement must have been enough, because suddenly there were hands on him, and he could hear Phil’s voice right by his face.

“Tommy, are you... can you hear me?” Tommy opened his eyes, then, and looked at Phil. He looked terrible, dark circles and tear tracks evident on his face. When he glanced around the

room, nobody else looked much better. There were... a lot of people in the room, actually. Tubbo and Ranboo were curled up together on the floor, asleep. Wilbur was leaning against the wall, looking horribly guilty, and Techno was next to him, looking worried and annoyed. Dream, Niki, and Schlatt were on the floor by Tubbo and Ranboo, not asleep but looking exhausted. He could hear others too, Fundy and Eret, probably, in the next room over. Phil was still trying to get his attention. "Hey, kiddo. I know you're probably feeling a little overwhelmed, I just need you to look at me for a second, okay?" Tommy's eyes snapped back to Phil's face. "Oh, there you are. Hello, Tommy."

"What-" His throat hurt, burned like it had been torn raw, "What happened?"

"We were kind of hoping you could answer that, bud. When we found you..."

"You looked dead. Did you take something?" Techno asked, a little bluntly.

"Take something?" Tommy repeated, his brain feeling a little fuzzy.

"Drugs? Something to relax?" Schlatt supplied. "Your pain killers? A xan?"

"No, no I didn't..." Had he taken something? He couldn't remember doing so. "I didn't take anything."

"Are you sure?" Techno looked uncomfortable. "We aren't going to be mad, we just want,"

"I didn't take anything. I just... zoned out, I guess." Tommy finished feebly.

"You just zoned out," Techno repeated. "Yeah, okay, you just laid down in a field in the middle of nowhere for six hours while everyone searched for you. Sure." He sounded angry.

"I didn't- I told Wil I'd be back in the morning."

“Would you have been? When we found you you looked like you were trying to become one with the ground.” Techno snapped.

“I was just laying down. I wanted to watch the clouds.”

“It was storming. It was pouring rain when we found you, and you were so out of it it was like you weren’t even a person.”

“I... sorry? I don’t know what that was.” Techno stomped forward, and Tommy would have flinched if he could bring himself to move at all, but when Techno reached him he didn’t swing, he just pulled Tommy into a bone-crushing hug and whispered angrily to him,

“If you ever do that again, I’ll kill you.” Tommy laughed, just a little, and finally pulled his arms up to wrap them around his brother.

“Yeah, okay.”

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Summary

A conversation on the meals that went uneaten

Tommy wished it was a one-off event. A fluke. But it kept *happening*.

He was sitting on the couch, watching a video on Wilbur's phone when suddenly everything felt far away. The last thing he accurately remembered was grabbing Wil's wrist, and then everything went fuzzy.

When they pulled him out of it, Wil had a bruise on his wrist and Tommy had tears streaming down his face. Phil looked pale, Techno was pacing angrily, but Tommy could tell it wasn't really at him.

He was in the store with Techno, grocery shopping, and suddenly they were home and Tommy was mid chopping vegetables. He nearly threw the knife, jerking away from it so violently Techno thought he had cut himself. Nobody knew what to do when Tommy just kept repeating 'why aren't we still in the store?'. They sat him on the couch with tea and Techno walked him through what they had done since the store, and Tommy could tell he *should* remember but it was like it had been poorly erased, just a smudge of what it should have been and too faint to accurately read.

He was talking to Phil about the new house, they'd been told their offer was accepted and they would be getting the keys soon, and then he was alone in his bed, and it was nighttime. It had been noon. He feebly called out for someone, but his door was shut and they couldn't hear him.

They told him they couldn't tell when he got like that after the first few times, once it would happen but he'd still be moving, which was true at first. He seemed normal, if a little subdued, but he got like that sometimes. It wasn't until Wil found him staring into the

backyard blankly that they started to be able to see the true, undeniable sign. They'd pulled him inside, sat him down at the kitchen table, and were trying to ask about what he was looking at, and Techno caught it,

"He isn't shaking." Wilbur looked confused before it actually dawned on him what it meant. Tommy was *always* shaking. He was consistently too anxious to sit still. But now, he was as steady as a surgeon. No fidgeting, no tremble in his hands, looking almost relaxed. They all wondered if this was what he would have looked like if he'd grown up with them, but nobody voiced it.

"What do we do?" Wilbur asked the room. Phil looked a little sick.

"I don't know, mate. We don't know what's wrong with him."

"Should we... take him to the hospital? Is it just like, brain damage?" Techno asked, and Wilbur looked away guiltily.

"No, I... I think maybe a therapist might be a better idea. I don't know how he'll feel about it, though."

"Tommy doesn't have anything against therapy," Wilbur replied. "He always tells me about how good it is that Tech and I see someone."

"But would he feel the same way about him seeing a therapist?"

"I don't know. Are you sure it's a mental thing? He's never done this before."

"He has," Techno cut in. "After your fight. The one before the fire. He shut down, but I thought he was just mad, I didn't realize." Tommy was still staring blankly at his hands. "Tommy? Are you back with us?" Tommy hummed a little, but didn't reply. "Guess not."

“So, what? It’s triggered by me? He didn’t do this when Dad scared him!”

“I think it can be triggered by us yelling at him, but that’s obviously not the only cause.”

“Wait, when I scared him? When did that happen?” Wilbur and Techno both stiffened and turned to him guiltily.

“Uhh...”

“First week,” Tommy mumbled. “You slammed a phone. Was scary. Techno gave me bandages.” He was clearly still out of it.

“Why did you need bandages? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“I freaked out, hurt myself,” Tommy half explained, his voice very low and even.

“He didn’t want you to know, I guess we just never brought it up. He was pretty messed up from it.”

“He never acted any different, though? What day specifically, do you remember?”

“Uh, it was the day you had to go to the office while you were supposed to stay home, I think,” Techno looked uncomfortable. “It was pretty early.”

“Wasn’t your fault. Wasn’t thinkin’ bout you. Was.. was thinking about before.”

“What do you mean, before?” Phil asked carefully. Tommy shrugged.

“When I was the older brother. Couldn’t let ‘em hurt the kids.” Tommy tapped his hands against the table. “Couldn’t let ‘em... but it’s okay now, don’t need protecting here. Nobody hits you if you’re bad. Nobody locks you in the closets. Just can’t eat sometimes. That’s hard, but you can earn back food quickly.”

“Why can’t you eat sometimes?” Phil looked really sick, now, and Techno and Wilbur didn’t look much better.

“Dad, maybe we shouldn’t-“

“Because I was bad. Gotta make up for it before bad kids get to eat. Phil doesn’t like it if you ask about the punishments. Mrs. Rose didn’t like talking about punishments neither. Didn’t like Mrs. Rose, she used a belt when she got mad.”

“Can you tell us when you were punished with us, Tommy?”

“Didn’t eat the rice right. Had to put it in the fridge. Didn’t like the carrots, didn’t get to eat lunch. Made a face at the curry, didn’t know what it was. Techie thought I didn’t like it. He hasn’t made any since.” Tommy’s voice had gone soft, almost childlike. Wilbur was crying again. Techno was looking at Phil in panic, but Phil looked totally lost.

“Tommy... those weren’t punishments.” Wilbur had grabbed Techno’s shirt tightly. Phil was holding the edge of the table.

“I know. Not s’posed to talk about ‘em. Don’t make Phil angry. Phil fought in wars.” Tommy agreed airily. “Phil can be scary. Technoblade gets scared when Phil gets mad. Wilbur gets mad back. Techno needs quiet and books. Wilbur needs distracting. Phil needs to be left alone,” Tommy recited like he was reading from a book.

“Tommy, why don’t you go lay down for a bit, bud? You’re not feeling well,” Phil choked out. Tommy nodded and wandered off towards his room. “What... what the fuck?” They heard Tommy’s door close.



“Holy shit,” Techno mumbled. “Holy shit, what the fuck?”

“I... yeah,” Phil agreed. “What the fuck do we even say to that?”

“I... are we equipped for this?” Wilbur asked, sounding a little freaked out. “I don’t think we are.”

“None of this shit was in his file. How did they not know that? How did they not know he was getting starved and beaten?”

“I mean, we kind of knew, Wil and I,” Techno admitted. “But... I didn’t think,”

"We didn't think he still felt like this," Wilbur finished.

“This is important, guys. I need you to tell me what you know. I understand not wanting to betray Tommy’s trust, but I have to know these things,” Phil said emphatically.

“Tommy doesn’t... open up much. What we know has been more out of speculation than anything. But we got a pretty good guess when you scared him. He was screaming when I came home, totally gone to the world and begging for help, trying to save kids who weren’t there. He told me he couldn’t focus because he didn’t have anyone to protect and he spiraled,” Techno explained.

“He did tell us, about the food, we just didn’t understand. Remember? He said he’d been gone all day and hadn’t done anything yet,” Wilbur added quietly. “He had meant he hadn’t done anything to be forgiven for whatever he thought did wrong. He took the food Techno gave him as the punishment being over. He wouldn’t eat until then and he was totally fine after you brought him the soup.”

“That day with the carrots, he didn’t eat dinner or breakfast either. I brought him lunch to his room the next day.”

“What about the curry? When did that end for him?”

“Breakfast two days later. I made him food,” Techno replied. “How didn’t we see that sooner?”

“Because it wouldn’t have ever crossed our minds to keep food from a kid.”

“But it did cross someone’s, and I intend to find out who. Excuse me, I have a few phone calls to make.” Phil left the room, fuming.

His first call was to George, who got yelled at for so long he would probably need to get his hearing checked. Then he continued working through every social worker who had so much as glanced at Tommy, which was a depressingly high number. They all repeated the same thing, that at any sign of abuse the children were removed from the home. His last call was one he did not expect to make. The call was to Margaret, Tommy’s previous foster. She had given George permission to share her number, which Phil was grateful for. She had housed Tommy not only the most recently, but also the longest.

*“Hello?”*

“Hi, is this Margaret? This is Phil Watson.”

*“Yes, this is she. What can I help you with, Mr. Watson?”*

“It’s about Tommy.”

*“Is Thomas okay?”* Phil grit his teeth to not correct her. He could hear the concern in her voice.

“No, ma’am, I don’t think so. There was a fire, a few months back, and he got pretty badly hurt. He’s been recovering since, but we’ve recently had some... issues. We were hoping you may be able to help us with understanding what’s happening.”

*“How badly hurt? What sort of issues? Should I come to visit?”* Her voice had gone up an octave, and Phil was left wondering again how she could have sent him away. She obviously cared.

“He was... very severely injured in the fire, but he’s recovering well. The issue we’re having is more of a... mental health-related problem.”

*“The mood swings? When they get bad you need to get him away from whatever is causing him to get defensive. He’ll fight tooth and nail against imaginary threats if you let him.”* Phil was almost impressed at how easily she had spoken about him. As if she knew him well enough to see past his walls.

“Er- no, though we have noticed those. He recently has been... zoning out, I suppose? Sometimes it’s bad enough that he can’t seem to move, other times he seems totally fine but then suddenly he’s back and can’t remember much at all. Did you experience that with him?”

*“Thomas never sat still. He would be forgetful, occasionally, but no, I don’t believe he had those sorts of episodes here. Have you asked his therapist about them?”*

“Er- he’s not currently seeing a therapist.”

*“Why on earth not?”* She cried indignantly. *“He should be seeing a therapist weekly, or at least every other week! Don’t you know what he’s been through?”*

“I... no, ma’am, we don’t. He hasn’t been particularly forthcoming with that information. That’s why we were reaching out. We were hoping...”

*“Have you tried **asking** him?” She replied flatly. “Thomas will always give you a direct answer to a direct question.”*

“We didn’t want to be invasive-“

*“You are his guardian. You need that information to be able to parent him correctly. He will be more willing to talk to you if you make him speak. He **wants** to speak about it, even if he doesn’t want to bring it up.” Her voice sounded far away for a moment. “Evan! Please put that down, you know we don’t like you touching- I’m sorry, Mr. Watson, I need to go.”*

“Wait! Before you go, I just... why did you give Tommy up? You obviously care about him, still.”

*“This was not the right environment for Thomas. His greatest fear is being unwanted, and he felt like that with us. It only took someone telling him one time that they didn’t want him around for all of the progress we made to go backward. I’m sorry, I really have to go. Please tell Thoma- Tommy that he is welcome to call to visit any time. Goodbye.” She hung up, leaving Phil feeling more guilty than he had before.*

—

Tommy came back in his bed. He immediately could tell something was wrong, still a little floaty, but he felt okay enough to stand, and to leave the room. He entered the kitchen to see Wil and Techno curled together, talking quietly. He could hear Phil talking upstairs.

“Hey, guys.” They both looked up at him immediately, and he was shocked to see how *distraught* they looked. “Woah, what’s wrong?” Wilbur stood up, and Techno followed, and then they were hugging him. They did that a lot. They were *very* touchy-feely. “Guys, you’re freaking me out, here.”

“Tommy, we’re so *sorry*, ” Wilbur sobbed.

“I? Forgive you? What are you sorry for?”

“You were zoned out again... and you talked a little bit about... your past.” Neither of them expected Tommy to *relax* at that, but he did, and pulled out of the hug to give them a confused smile.

“Okay? What’s wrong with that?”

“You aren’t... upset?” Techno asked, looking confused.

“Not really? I mean you guys had to find out at some point why I jumped houses so often, right? I’d rather I told you when I could remember it, but it’s no big deal.”

“You told Dad too,” Wilbur murmured.

“Oh. That’s... less okay. But still, not a big deal. Why are you so upset?”

“Tommy, you were *hurt* so, so badly! Why wouldn’t we be upset?”

“I mean, it’s in the past. I’m not getting hurt anymore, and I can defend myself now. It’s a win-win, really.”

“A win-win? Theseus, your prizes for winning seem to be going into low power mode or clawing at your own skin. Those don’t seem like wins, to me,” Techno argued, a pinched expression on his face. Phil came down the stairs and into the kitchen looking exhausted.

“Tommy? Are you back with us, now?”

“It’s me, yeah.”

“I think... we should talk about some of the things that came up when you weren’t all there,” Phil said carefully. “We should sit.” They did, and Tommy shifted uncomfortably at the looks they were giving him.

“Uh, so I have a fucked up past,” Tommy said finally if only to clear the tension a bit. It didn’t seem to work.

“Yes, we’re... starting to see that,” Phil agreed.

“Really, you should have guessed, what with my weird moods and all,” Tommy joked, but it fell flat.

“Tommy, this is serious. We... think we may have made some missteps, along the way, that we want to clarify with you before anything else.” Phil took a deep breath. “First of all, I want to sincerely apologize for scaring you your first week here. I didn’t realize how it affected you, and if I would have I’d have apologized sooner. It doesn’t excuse my behavior, and I will work on better controlling my tone and actions when they can so negatively affect you.”

“Water under the bridge. I’m not upset about it, anymore.”

“Thank you, but I will still try to be better. But... more than that, you mentioned something that I think we all need to talk about. I believe you called them punishments.” Tommy stiffened at that.

“We don’t have to talk about them, Phil. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. I know you know what I’m talking about, but I want you to explain it, if you can. Explain it to us as if we don’t know what you’re talking about.” He did not mention that they really didn’t know.

“I... okay? The punishments are directly related to food? It’s... if I’m ungrateful for what I’ve been given I need to make it up and prove that I deserve to eat,” Tommy relayed, a little out of his depth. Did they not think he understood?

“Tommy, there were never any situations in which we were willingly denying you food. We know that’s how you took them, but that was never what was intended. We would never withhold food from you. You are welcome to any food in the house, at any time, regardless of your behavior.”

“But- but you said...” Tommy’s head was spinning. “No, that’s not right. You *told* me to put the food away while I was eating. You’ve told me not to eat before.”

“I told you to put the food in the fridge the first time, actually,” Techno piped up. “Not Phil.”

“I-“ was that right? Tommy couldn’t remember. “Either way, it still stands.”

“No, it doesn’t, Tommy. I didn’t mean to put the food and never eat again, I just meant to put it away and eat it later, when you were hungry. You looked like it was making you sick.”

“B-but, the other times! Phil, you specifically said ‘if you don’t want it, then don’t eat.’”

“I meant... My wording was poor, but I just meant not to eat what Techno had made, not to not eat at all,” Phil replied, looking distraught. “Tommy, we would never deny you food. You don’t need to earn the right to eat.”

“But... but,” Tommy looked around frantically, waiting for someone to break and laugh and tell him they were just messing with him, but nobody did. They all looked dead serious and genuinely upset about it. “But you ended the punishments! After I cleaned or helped clean you would give me back food.”

“That... wasn’t what happened, Theseus. I brought you food the first time in a last-ditch effort to make you eat. We thought you had an eating disorder or something, or that you were

uncomfortable eating in front of us. We didn't *know*." Techno frowned. "I did it the next few times because we knew it helped the first time, we just didn't know why." Tommy's heart was pounding in his chest.

"I... I don't understand."

"Toms, we weren't punishing you. You weren't in trouble. We would never do that to you, nobody should have done that to you."

"But... it works. You become more grateful if you lose something. It makes it mean more."

"No, Tommy. It makes you afraid. Afraid to lose something you need to survive."

"Those... aren't those the same, though?"

"No, Tommy. You don't need to be afraid of us. Ever. We aren't going to hurt you," Phil said earnestly. He reached out and took Tommy's hand. "And if we do scare you, please, *please* tell us so we can make it right. We don't want you to be afraid."

"I... I'm sorry," Tommy tried, looking around in a panic. "I don't... I'm not afraid of you, really. It's okay."

"No, it isn't okay. But we're going to make it up to you, alright? We're going to prove that we want the best for you."

"What those people did was wrong, Tommy. You didn't deserve that," Wilbur said firmly. "We aren't like them, though."

"No, no of course not. You wouldn't hurt me unless I deserved it," Tommy agreed. Techno's face crumpled a little at that.



“Not even then. Whatever mistakes you make, we still aren’t going to hurt you,” Techno sounded so *sure*.

“But what if-“

“Never, Tommy, okay?” Tommy didn’t want to believe them. His mind was fighting with itself, the part that loved them and the part that knew better screaming at each other in tandem. The love was louder.

“Okay.”

“We love you, Tommy.”

“I... yeah. I love you, too.”

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Summary

Progress is not linear.

They sat. The conversation felt awkward but genuine as Tommy recanted the homes he had been in, talking softly but clearly. He wanted to pause to reassure Wilbur several times, as he had repetitively started crying, but he didn't, just forged forward through sheer will. Techno looked uncomfortable, mostly. Phil looked like he would burn the earth to ash. Tommy didn't stop, talked through it with them until there was nothing left to say because he was sure the second he stopped talking he wouldn't be willing to start again, and none of them interrupted.

"Jesus Christ, we need to find you a therapist," Techno remarked when Tommy finished. It was enough to break the tension, and Tommy nodded.

"Yeah, might not be a bad idea."

—

As soon as the heaviness of the conversation abated, Techno grinned maniacally at Tommy and Wilbur, as if he had just remembered something hilarious. "You know, Tommy called me something earlier. Proof that I'm the favorite brother." Phil shook his head with a small smile, excusing himself from the table and leaving the room. Wilbur must have known what Techno was talking about, because he looked between them exasperatedly and shook his head.

"No! That doesn't count, he was like, having a meltdown!"

"Oh, it counts."

“What did I say?” Tommy asked, almost nervous.

“You called me Techie.” Technoblade’s grin was so wide it was a miracle it didn’t hurt.

“I did not! Oh my GOD,” Tommy screeched, turning bright red. “Nope, absolutely not!” Techno laughed, pulling Tommy into his arms and sticking his tongue out at Wilbur. “Get off me, you bitch! I did *not* call you that!”

“Oh, but you did, Theseus.”

Tommy cackled and pulled out of Techno’s grip. “Fuck off, Tech. Nobody asked you anyway!”

The teasing did not end there. Tommy pretended like he didn’t know they were only acting like this to keep Tommy from spiraling, he wasn’t blind and he didn’t miss their worried glances, but he was grateful, and it was fun, and he was happy.

---

The first therapy session was... exhausting. Tommy had gone back to the therapist he had seen with Margaret, and she had missed no beats one pulling Tommy apart piece by piece.

“So, New family. How are they?”

“They’re fine.”

“You don’t like them?”

“I do.”

“Tommy,” She gave him a disapproving look. “You have to actually talk to me if you want this to be of any use to you.”

“I’m talking!” She looked unimpressed. “I like them! They’re fine! What do you want from me?”

“Tell me about your foster siblings.”

“They’re brothers. Wilbur and Technoblade. They’re older than me.”

“None younger?”

“No,” Tommy squirmed. “Well, not physically. Wil acts like a toddler half the time.” He amended in a teasing voice.

“Oh, you actually do like them! Wilbur, tell me about him.”

“He’s a musician! He plays guitar.”

“You like the guitar? You didn’t like when your previous foster brother played.”

“I didn’t dislike it! Just...Evan sucked at it. Wil is good, really good. He makes money from his music,” Tommy explained. “He’s on Spotify.”

“Anything I would know?”

“Oh god, I hope not. I think you’re too mentally stable to listen to his music.”

“Oh? Does he write songs about mental illness?”

“No, no. He writes songs about... the aftermath of mental illness, I guess. Living life despite it.”

“You seem fond. Do you listen to his music often?”

“I- yeah. I switch between music and audiobooks a lot, but when it’s music it’s his a lot of the time.”

“Audiobooks? Is that from Wilbur too?”

“Techno, actually. He likes greek myths, I’ve been listening to them. He calls me Theseus.”

“That’s not a very happy story, why does he call you that?”

“Uh, well, It’s fitting, innit? Guy thinks he’s a hero, but when he tries to help it backfires and he gets booted out. That’s like my whole thing.”

“His story had a sad ending though, didn’t it? Killed by the one who housed him?”

“I mean, Wilbur kind of killed me once,” Her eyebrows shot up at that.

“That’s... quite the joke to be making about a traumatic experience.”

“Oh, it was more traumatic for them than it was for me.” Dr. Puffy’s eyebrows shot up at that.

“Elaborate.”

“I mean, if I would have died-died they would have had to live with that. I would have just gotten some rest.”

“So you don’t think burning alive was traumatic for you?”

“I mean, it obviously was, seeing as I’m turning into the human version of sleep mode, but I think it was worse for them,”

“Ah, right. The dissociation. When did that start, again?”

“The what?”

“Dissociation. That’s what those episodes are called. They’re… usually caused by severe trauma, though that isn’t always the case.”

“Oh. Uh, they started getting bad after my last fight with Wil, but it’s apparently happened before.”

“Do you fight with Wil often?”

“Uh, no, not really. Sometimes. More than I fight with the others.”

“Does he hurt you, in these fights? Do they get physical?”

“No, no of course not. We just push each other’s buttons. Brothers fight sometimes, that’s normal.”

“You consider him your brother?” Puffy had a soft smile on her face.

“Yeah, o’ course I do.”

“Of course? You’ve never called any of your foster siblings your sibling before.”

“That’s not true! I called Ev my little brother! And Clem looked like me, even when I didn’t say anything people always thought we were related.”

“Oh, you haven’t mentioned Clem in a while. Have you spoken to her?”

“No, no. She’s out traveling probably. Haven’t spoken to her in ages.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Course I do, don’t be stupid,” Tommy scoffed. Clem, his previous foster sister, had bounced homes with him for years, causing trouble and helping Tommy stay out of it. She’d aged out of the system and dropped off the face of the Earth years ago. “But she got out, which is all that really matters for us, right?”

“So you’re still planning on leaving when you turn 18?”

“When I graduate, yeah. No reason not to, really.”

“Your family isn’t a good enough reason?”

“No. They’re temporary anyway.”

“Do you think they feel that way about you?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care, if I’m being honest.”

They talked more, about Tommy’s friends and about the things he had been doing in the months since he’d last been there. At the end of the session, she’d given him time to collect himself and they’d scheduled another appointment for a week out. Wilbur drove him home. They made slightly awkward conversation in the car.

“How was it?”

“What, therapy? You know how it goes.”

“I usually leave therapy wanting to cry, but you look okay.”

“Eh, this was just a catch-up session. See me next week looking like I’ve been chopping onions for two days straight,” Tommy joked.

“Oh, really? Do you usually have a hard time with it?”

“Not a hard time, no. Dr. P just tends to push until you break, y’know? Wants you to actually ‘feel your emotions’ or some shit.” Wilbur laughed at that.

“Oh, how dare she make you have feelings?” Tommy grinned at him.



“I know, so rude, right?”

“The rudest.”

They pulled into the driveway, and they could hear yelling as soon as the door was open.

“Is... that Techno and Dream?” Tommy asked, frozen in the doorway. Wilbur did not look phased.

“Oh, god. They’re friends again,” Wilbur deadpanned.

“What?” Tommy could feel the instinct to help screaming at him, but Wilbur just rolled his eyes.

“They used to fight like this constantly. They’re not really mad, don’t worry. Watch,” Wilbur grinned and gestured to Tommy to follow him. When they rounded the corner, Dream was half laying on Techno, yelling animatedly. Techno looked totally comfortable, but simultaneously was glaring at Dream like he was the worst human being on the planet.

“It’s a stupid story! It makes no sense that he could have survived that!”

“It’s a kid’s book, I really don’t know what to tell you.”

“I don’t care! There is no way he- oh, hey guys- no way he survived being shot with a killing curse just because he used a disarming spell!”

“Hello, Theseus, Wilbur. It’s a book about *wizards*. It was magic or something, I don’t know.”

“Are you two... good?” Tommy asked, bewildered.

“No!”

“Yeah, we’re fine.” They replied in unison and glared at each other. “Dream is being offended about a book he hasn’t read since he was twelve having plot relevant inaccuracies.” Wilbur was holding back laughter, and Tommy just shook his head.

“I’m going to my room, I can’t deal with this right now. Have fun, don’t get blood on the couch, it’s a rental,” Tommy teased, heading toward the bedroom with a grin. He heard the fighting start back up as soon as he went to close his door, but it was muffled enough by the door itself that he could no longer make out the words.

After what felt like hours, and it probably was, there was a small knock. The door creaked open to reveal Dream, who looked pleased from what Tommy could see behind the flu mask. He was tempted to ask for the hundredth time why he insisted on wearing it constantly, but decided against it. “Blade says food’s done, if you’re hungry.”

“I’m surprised he had time to cook, what with you laying on him and arguing about wizards.”

“I resemble that remark!”

“Do *not* start saying that again Clay, I will fight you!” Techno yelled from across the house. Dream winked at Tommy and left, probably to go antagonize Techno some more.

Tommy laughed and rolled to his feet, wincing at the dull ache in his body at the sudden movement, and went to eat.

—

Progress was not linear. Tommy wished it was. He wanted above all else to say he was cured and better, but it was glaringly obvious to him that that would not be true for a long, long time. A month and a half of therapy was not enough to fix what was broken.

Case and point, packing.

Wil had come into his room looking slightly annoyed, and all he had said was, “You need to start packing your shit,” before darting off to his own room. Logically, some small part of Tommy knew it was because they were moving to the new house. They had begun packing things in the living areas a week ago, and Phil had the keys to the new house as of the day before, so it was time to pack their personal belongings and transfer them over.

Unfortunately, Tommy was not particularly logical, and the words had spread cold dread through his body. His brain was screaming at him, telling him this was it, that they had finally had enough, and that George would be here soon to gather Tommy’s meager belongings into the back of his sedan and set off to another house, another family that did not want him. He was even less likely to be wanted now, with a temper driven shorter by the way his body ached constantly, by the way his skin was covered in pucked pink and white scars, by the way he lost hours and days without so much as a warning. Tommy was too *damaged* to be desirable as anything but an extra check in the pockets of any foster family willing to take him at all. He could feel icy numbness spreading through his hands as he haphazardly tossed his things into the bags Phil had given him. He stripped his- the- bed of his blankets and left the sheets and anything that did not explicitly belong to him neatly folded and piled on the mattress. Tommy quietly cried, mourning the loss of his brothers and his home, and waited for the familiar sound of goodbyes.

The mistake was not caught until later, when Phil came in and chided Tommy for not packing the rest of the things, and Tommy broke down sobbing, apologizing for whatever he had done. Phil had been so alarmed that he called for Techno and Wil, who had entered the room with identical looks of panic on their faces. The sight of the teenager half begging for forgiveness was not what any of them were expecting, and because of that, it took much longer than it should have to coax Tommy into breathing regularly. It took even longer for them to realize *why* he was upset in the first place. It didn’t become clear until through choked breaths Tommy asked when George would arrive that they understood, and their hearts shattering in unison was all but audible in the small bedroom.

They reassured him that they were not letting him go anywhere any time soon, and eventually, Tommy relaxed and explained through half-sobs that the *way* the instructions were given had set him off. Wilbur apologized, Tommy accepted. The things were packed, no more tears were shed. Tommy mentioned it to Dr. Puffy at their next session the following day, and preened under the praise of her congratulating him on being able to communicate why he was upset.

Wilbur became more careful with his tone around Tommy. Techno reminded them that mistakes were okay, so long as they learned from them. They moved into their new home together and without another issue.

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Summary

Tommy is given a choice.

Tommy could tell something was wrong with Wilbur. It had started days before their last fight, and while Tommy thought they had moved past it, Wil still seemed... off. It irritated Tommy to no end that he couldn't get a read on the man, as Wil always seemed like a half-open book. He had his secrets, obviously, but Tommy usually could figure it out if he squinted. But nothing had happened. They moved into the house and everything went fine, but Wilbur was getting more and more agitated as time passed. He wasn't snapping at Tommy, quite the contrary, he seemed to reserve a bit of pleasantness left in him to talk to the boy, but he was all ice and sharpness when speaking to anyone else. Phil got the brunt of it, but Techno was getting snapped at nearly as often, even if it wasn't to the degree of Phil.

Wilbur was sitting outside, staring blankly into the yard like it held the answers to the universe when Tommy found him. He wasn't necessarily looking for Wil, just sort of scoping out the house to see what everyone was up to, really, but he decided this was as good a time as any to talk to him, so he stepped out the back door.

"Tell me you aren't dissociating now too, I think Phil has enough on his plate without another kid bluescreening." Wilbur turned to him, all honey and soft edges, and smiled.

"No, of course not. Just thinking. Do you wanna sit?" Tommy shrugged and sat down, hesitating before gently taking Wilbur's hand that was still reaching toward him.

"Wil, what's going on with you, man? It feels like you're a million miles away." Wil tensed, but then it was gone, soft and sunshine again.

"Nothing's wrong, bud. Just feeling a little tired."

“Tired enough to tell your dad you hate him?” Tommy asked skeptically. “Sounds like something else is going on.” Wilbur slumped, pulling his hand from Tommy’s to run it through his own hair.

“I don’t hate him. I just... I’m feeling bad, right now. It’ll pass.”

“Why are you feeling bad?”

“I... don’t want to tell you.” Tommy stiffened.

“Wilbur, the fire-“

“I know, I know you don’t blame me and I know nobody else does, but it’s more than that, isn’t it? It’s more than just the fire that has left you *permanently injured*. It’s just everything, I keep fucking up. I keep hurting you, and scaring Techno, and upsetting Dad and-“ Wilbur’s voice cracked, “and I hate myself for it. I hate that I can’t just do better.” Tommy sighed.

“I’m not going to say you haven’t made mistakes. But you know they still love you, right? Not despite the mistakes, but unconditionally, they will always love you. You’re twenty-two. You don’t need to be perfect. You’ll figure your shit out.”

“How many more times do I have to hurt the people I care about before that? Techno doesn’t make Dad cry. He doesn’t send you into a spiral where you forget who you are. He’s younger than I am, and he’s got it all figured out. Why can’t I do that?”

“Technoblade has less shit figured out than he pretends to,” Tommy scoffed. “Dude’s one stray hair out of place from declaring himself an anarchist and burning down the government, I swear.”

“But he’d never hurt you. He’d never hurt me, or Dad.”

“Just because you haven’t seen it, doesn’t mean it isn’t happening. Tech is more low-key than you are, in everything he does. He hurts the same way, subtle.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, your dad keeps an awfully well-stocked medicine cabinet for not being a medical professional, but his hands always shake when he wraps bandages like he’s trying hard not to panic while he does it. Now I don’t like being fretted over, but he had that habit before I ever needed help, and you love being the center of attention, so that had to come from somewhere. He was a soldier, so maybe it came from that, but I’d put money on it being from Tech’s temper getting him into fights he couldn’t win.” Wilbur frowned. “Techno doesn’t like being the center of attention, doesn’t want people to worry about him, right? So Phil hides his worry, so Techno doesn’t hide his hurt.” Tommy shrugged. “Besides, Techno makes me fuckin’ nervous. He’s too quiet, and he’s terrible at announcing himself before he enters a room. Makes me twitchy.”

“But-“

“Hey, I’m not done. And you get *super* protective over Techno. That comes from something, doesn’t it? He must have done something way back when that left you scared enough to try to protect him from everything. I don’t know what, you don’t need to tell me, but I know it’s there.”

“I hate that you’re so confident in that.” Wilbur groaned. “Why are you so normal and mature? Can you go back to being loud and annoying?”

“Sure, afterward I’ll call you a bitch and everything. But first, I’m gonna drag you out of whatever hell you’re forcing yourself to wallow in,” Tommy teased, bumping his shoulder against Wil’s. “And I’m going to make you apologize to Phil.”

“Can I ask you something?” Wilbur looked at Tommy with guilt painted across his face. Tommy nodded. “Before the fire, did... did you know we weren’t going to send you away? Or did you think I meant it, what I said?” Tommy froze, and he considered lying for a beat, but he knew that this was important.

“I... had packed my bags,” Tommy admitted. “I know now, you didn’t mean it, but I wasn’t thinking super clearly then.”

“So you would have died thinking you were unwanted,” Wilbur confirmed. “I knew Schlatt was talking out his ass.”

“Schlatt?”

“When you were in the hospital he gave us this speech about how you cared about us ‘*so much*’ and how you would know that we felt the same, but I knew he was just saying that because I was upset.”

“Well... he wasn’t completely off base,” Tommy admitted with a laugh. “I annoyed people all the time because I talk about you all so much. He wasn’t wrong when he said I care about you.”

“But you didn’t think we felt the same.”

“I... no. I still don’t believe it, if I’m being honest. Not because of anything you did, or anyone else, I just... I feel things ‘too deeply’ I guess. More than other people do. I get attached fast and get protective even faster. I don’t expect people to reciprocate that, but...”

“But you wish they would?”

“No, not really.” Wilbur glanced at him, confused. “I don’t like people caring about me. It makes it feel like obligation, like I’m stuck until they realize I’m too much. I used to lash out when families started talking about adoption and shit, I would have already done that here if I wasn’t so fucking tired.” Tommy let out a dry laugh. “Phil has the adoption papers in his room now, and I’m not excited about that conversation at all.”



“You’re going to say no.” It wasn’t a question, but Tommy could hear the wonder behind it anyway. Could hear the ‘why’.

“Yeah, I am. I’ve told Tech this, I guess I haven’t told you, really. I don’t want to be adopted, I’ve been offered before and I’ve never said yes.”

“Was it that lady you were with before us?”

“Her, two homes before that, one when I was a good bit younger. As soon as the papers came out I started acting like a prick until they sent me off.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like it changes things. I want to leave when I graduate, start over. I was afraid that if we signed those papers I wouldn’t be able to. Now, I’m afraid even if we don’t sign them I’ll still not be able to.” Tommy looked at his hands. “I worry that I’m going to hate myself for it when I do.”

“So you’re still planning on leaving, then? You’re just going to walk away without so much as a how do you do? After Phil gave you a home, after we gave you a family? You’re just going to... go?”

“I’ve paid back Phil tenfold for what he’s done for me already. I think 15 grand makes us even,” Tommy snorted.

“You gave Phil *fifteen thousand dollars*? ” Wilbur screeched. Tommy laughed.

“For the house, yeah. Old bastard thinks he’s going to pay me back for it.”

“Where did you even get that kind of money?”

“It was my savings. Not all of it, but a good chunk. I figured, the house wouldn’t have burned down if I wasn’t there, right? Might as well help get the new one.”

“Why are you allowed to blame yourself for the fire but if I do it, I get lectured?” Wilbur pouted, trying to lighten the conversation.

“Because everyone is afraid if they lecture me too hard I’ll break,” Tommy snorted. “You’re upset.”

“A little, yeah. I’ll miss you, when you go.”

“There’s always texting.”

“Will you text us, though?” The question was loaded. It really meant ‘will you just leave and forget we ever existed? Do you want us to forget you?’ But Tommy didn’t have a good answer to the subtext, so he opted for honesty.

“No, I probably won’t.” Wilbur flinched a little and nodded.

“Yeah, I didn’t figure.”

—

The adoption conversation came more quickly than Tommy anticipated. It was August, only a few short weeks until his last year of school began, and they were eating lunch. Tommy saw the paperwork on the table when he sat, but opted to ignore it until it was explicitly mentioned. Wilbur looked tense, Techno nervous, but Phil looked a little bit like he was going to hurl. Tommy looked impassive as ever.

“So- Tommy,” Phil started, and the table tensed in unison. “I wanted to talk to you about something.” Tommy knew what it was about, but nodded and pretended to be confused anyway. “I... well, it’s not a secret to anyone here that we consider you family, have since you first arrived. But... if you wanted, we... we wanted to make it official,” Phil smiled, pushing the papers toward him. “You don’t have to decide now, it’s a big choice, but-“

“Thank you, but no,” Tommy said firmly. He did not miss the way Wilbur and Techno flinched. He did not miss the way Phil deflated, but he held strong, ignoring the parts of him that screamed out, begging him to just say yes. “I’m not interested in being legally adopted, and it’s frankly a little late in the game to bother with the paperwork now,” Tommy explained, keeping the waver from his voice. He had given this speech a hundred times to himself in the mirror, but it felt worse, seeing their reactions.

“Oh. I... that’s okay, then,” Phil replied, his voice small. “That’s totally fine, Toms. No paperwork necessary.”

“Thank you,” Tommy said sincerely. “My answer doesn’t need to change anything,” he continued, but didn’t it? Didn’t it always change everything, telling someone that even if you loved them, you didn’t want them to attach themselves to you?

“Of course not, Tommy. We’re still a family, even without the papers,” Phil replied, and something in Tommy’s heart ached, seeing Phil try so hard to hide his own sadness.

“Is it alright if I head to my room?” Tommy asked. Phil nodded, so Tommy retreated quickly.

—

The second Tommy left the room, Techno and Wil were out of their seats, next to their father, whose face had crumpled the second his youngest could no longer see him.

“Dad-“ Wilbur choked out, and Phil just shook his head.

“You both warned me, and I knew it was a possibility, I just... I just hoped he’d change his mind, I guess.”

“He still could,” Techno tried, but it felt like lying.

“Maybe.”

—

Progress was not linear. Tommy repeated it as he stared in the mirror, trying and failing to ground himself. He could feel the way his edges were going fuzzy, the way he was feeling less and less human as the seconds warred on, and he tried to keep himself there, but eventually, he gave in to the nothing, and felt himself slip away.

Wilbur found him hours later staring blankly at the mirror, and let out a little heartbroken noise at the tear tracks that stained the younger’s face. He coaxed him up, into bed, and shot off a text to his brother and father to ask them to come up. Tommy wasn’t speaking, which happened sometimes, but they were able to get him aware of them, even slightly, without much trouble once they were all there. He was curled up against Wilbur, Techno at their feet, and Phil carefully sat on the edge of the bed, all of them speaking softly about nothing.

There wasn’t much they could do, when Tommy was like this, other than remind him that he was real and that they were there, so that’s what they did, reminding their youngest that he was safe and home, that they loved him and that things would be fine. He wasn’t lucid enough to respond, but he believed them, behind the faraway pull from whatever kept him from existing in the present, there was comfort and safety that bubble-wrapped his heart.

## Chapter 22

### Chapter Summary

Things often must break before they can be fixed.

### Chapter Notes

Jesus this was heavier than intended. I swear, we are finally getting to the healing in proper next chapter, y'all.

Tommy never intended to fight with Phil. He hated fighting, really, and Phil was scary when he wasn't even mad at him, so antagonizing the man was never in the plans. But here they were, screaming at each other like they were born to do it.

"Tommy, no! You're still not recovered! Under no circumstances are you going back to work!"

"It's not your fucking decision! I'm not asking for your *permission!*" Tommy was vaguely aware of both Techno and Wilbur pressed against the far wall of the living room, both probably a little panicked, but it wasn't in the forefront of his mind, at the moment.

"You're seventeen! You don't get to make these decisions on your own!"

"I'm literally the only person who gets to make these fucking decisions! You're right, I'm seventeen! I'm not a fucking child!"

"You're not an adult, either! I said no!"

“I’ll do it anyway! I did it before, I won’t hesitate to do it again!”

“You shouldn’t have had the damn job in the first place! As long as you live in my house, my decision is final!”

“Well, you weren’t fucking complaining when I was helping you buy the damn thing! Half my fucking savings went into this shithole, the least you can fucking do is let me earn some of it back!”

“Don’t try to guilt-trip me into this! I told you I’d pay you back!”

“It’s not me fucking guilt-tripping you! Besides, It’s gonna pretty hard to pay me back when I leave this stupid fucking place and never speak to you again, innit? Get fucked.”

“Tommy-“ Wilbur interjected, but was quickly cut off.

“Stay the *fuck* out of this Wilbur. It’s none of your goddamn business!” When Tommy turned to glare at Wil, Wilbur’s heart nearly stopped. Gone was the finally - *finally* - opening up teenager, gone were the sarcastic remarks and gentle smiles that Tommy was so good at, and in his place was all fire and brimstone, anger and aggression radiating off of him in waves. Techno grabbed Wilbur, pulling his brother back against the wall where he’d stepped away from.

“Theseus, come on, there’s no need-“

“No! Fuck you, Technoblade! You don’t get to pretend to be the voice of fucking reason either! I’m not some fucking pet you all can just keep locked away and hope I’ll magically stick around! This is my future you’re fucking with! It’s not just some fucking after-school activity so I can make some pocket money, I *need* to have a job. I have to be able to go!”

“Tommy, please, you have to understand where we’re coming fro-“ Phil pleaded, but Tommy just wheeled around angrily, and Phil’s voice caught in his throat. “Son, please, just listen-“

“No, I don’t fucking have to do anything! You don’t get to tell me to do shit! Who do you think you are, any of you? If you think your opinion matters, you’re sorely fucking mistaken. All you people are is family number sixty-two! You’re nothing! Just a bunch of sorry fucks who don’t know how to quit when you’re ahead!” Tommy clenched his fists so hard he drew blood, but he stood his ground, defiantly daring any of them to argue. “You aren’t my goddamn father, and I’m not your son.” Tommy ignored the way his own heart ached at the words, “It doesn’t fucking matter. I’ll call George in the morning. I’m sick of this.” He stormed up the stairs, toward his- the- bedroom.

“Tommy, please-“ whatever Phil was intending to say was cut off by Tommy slamming the door so hard the windows rattled. The family stood in silence for a beat before Wilbur broke it with a mournful sob, turning and tucking his head into his brother’s chest. Techno was shaking, and Phil was rooted to the ground, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Dad-“ Wilbur cried, which was all Phil needed to move, to pull his oldest sons into his chest.

—

The next morning was painfully quiet. When Wilbur came downstairs, he almost expected to be greeted with Phil and Techno crying at the table, or to see Phil going over the paperwork needed to send Tommy back. He did not expect to see Tommy in the kitchen, hair wild, making tea.

“T-Toms?” The blonde didn’t turn around, but he did get out a second mug from the cupboard and start making Wilbur a cup like he had done every morning for ages. He handed it over silently, and Wilbur took it with trembling hands. “Are- did you...?” The question died off, but the meaning was clear. Did you call? Are you leaving?

“I’m meeting George in town in an hour,” Tommy replied, his voice flat. “I didn’t want to freak you or Techno out by having him here.” Wilbur nearly laughed at that, at how Tommy was *still* somehow looking out for them despite everything.

“No, wouldn’t want to scare us,” Wilbur replied, a little petty, as he took a sip of the tea. It was exactly how Wil liked it, better than even Techno could make. It tasted bitter, in light of the circumstances.

“Wil, I... I’m sorry for what happened yesterday. I shouldn’t have raised my voice, and I shouldn’t have taken out my anger on you. On any of you.”

“So why did you?” Techno asked from the entryway. Tommy scoffed, holding out the other mug toward Techno without looking at him. Techno took it, cautiously, and then stepped away.

“You asked me, once, who the real Tommy was.” Tommy’s hands gripped the counter’s edge so tightly his knuckles went white. “That- last night- that was the real me. That’s who I am, underneath all of the shit I put up to make people think I’m better. I’m just some angry little kid who doesn’t know how to communicate without violence and threats. I tried to be better, but I’m always just going to break whatever I touch.” Tommy laughed humorously and looked at them. His eyes were rimmed red, and the shadows under his eyes made it clear that the messy hair was not from sleep. Eyes that were still too hard, too dull, nothing like the blue they were meant to be. “Just like my fucking parents. Just another fuck up who can’t get a grip.” Tommy shook his head and brushed past them, and neither made a move to stop him when he left out the front door.

---

George met him at a small coffee shop off the main road. Somewhere secluded enough for them to talk, but public enough that Tommy didn’t feel trapped. Tommy stared into his mug blankly for the first fifteen minutes of the meeting and didn’t say a word.

“So, why did you call me out here, Tommy? I expected you to have bags, or something, based on how you sounded.” Tommy grimaced at that and nodded. He hadn’t packed a single thing. He didn’t want to make the call in the first place, and he couldn’t bring himself to take a single item off the shelves and store them away. All he brought was his cellphone and the stupid bee charm bracelet Tubbo had given him.



“I- fucked up, last night. I said a lot of shit I regret and I thought by today I would be able to calm down and get my shit gathered up, but I didn’t.”

“Well, we can stop by Phil’s and get your things, if that’s what you want. I haven’t done any of the paperwork yet, but I’m sure we can find you somewhere to stay briefly until we find someone else.” Tommy almost agreed, almost just nodded, but the thought burned his throat and suddenly there were tears where the anger had been seconds before, shame and grief and loss weighing down on him like he’d just had to bury the family he never got to have. George crooned, sympathy evident as he stood and crossed over, pulling the teenager into a hug. “Hey, it’s alright, Tommy. Sometimes things don’t work out. It’s alright. It’s going to be fine, kiddo.”

“I don’t want to go,” Tommy croaked out. “I don’t want to have to do this again, George. I love them, they’re my *family*. I’m so tired of losing everything over and over again.”

“Shh, it’s okay, Tommy. If- if you don’t want to go, you don’t have to, okay? I’ll talk to Phil, I’m sure he’ll keep you. I’m sure it’ll be okay for you to stay a little longer.” Tommy just sobbed more, gripping George’s shirt like it was a lifeline for another beat, then two, and then he pulled away.

“Do... do you think so?”

“Of course. Here, I’ll call him now, okay? We’ll get this figured out.” George squeezed Tommy’s shoulders, and stood up. “I’ll be right back, I promise.”

Tommy sat in silence, trying to stop the shuddering sobs that racked his whole frame, so focused on catching his breath that he almost missed the nasally “Tommy?” That was directed at him. He knew the voice, recognized it from talks over bland dinner and jokes that always fell just a little flat, from the shrieks of hatred that spewed from his lips when Tommy had been given adoption papers. Evan, Margaret’s son was standing over the table with a nervous smile on his face, head tilted ever so slightly. “You look like shit, man.” Tommy barked out a laugh at that, bitter and just a little too loud. He’d forgiven the kid, but he hadn’t ever expected to see him again.

“Thanks, Ev. I’m sure I look better than I feel, at any rate.” Tommy could hear Margaret in the distance, calling for her son with something like fond annoyance in her tone. It made

Tommy's heart ache, made him miss when that tone was directed at him, too.

"Evan, what have I told you about- oh." And then she was there, brown hair tied neatly back and clothing prim and proper as always, Margaret was staring at him like she'd seen a ghost. "Oh, Thoma- Tommy," she said the name like it was foreign, like she'd never be able to make the noises correctly no matter how hard she practiced. "Love, you look like you've not slept in weeks, what on Earth happened?" Her voice was soft, just like it was when she talked him down from anger, just like it was when she picked him up from therapy, just like it was every time she told him he was family.

"I'm fine, Ma. Just doing what I always do, fucking up." He winced at the name. He had no right to call her that anymore.

"Language," she chastised gently, but she knelt down next to him anyway, carding a hand through his hair and giving him a sad smile. "You are not simply a culmination of your mistakes, remember? Tell me what really happened." Tommy had heard that line a thousand times, in the year he lived with her. *'You are not your mistakes, Thomas.'* *'You are more than your failures, and you are more than your success. You are a whole and complex human being regardless of what you have done or may do.'* She never told him he didn't make mistakes, was never one to sugar coat her words with false pretenses or white lies. He appreciated that, then, and he still did now.

"I- got into a fight with the foster family I was staying with. The dad, mostly. I called George instead of trying to fix it," He mumbled, barely loud enough for her to hear, and certainly not loud enough for Evan to hear over the sounds of the shop.

"The Watson's? You fought with Phil?" Tommy should have been surprised that Margaret knew his name, but she was always a bit controlling, so it didn't shock him that she'd known where he was.

"Yeah. He didn't want me to get a job, and I got mad because I'm still short the money I need to move out, and I snapped. I said some really nasty shi- stuff to him and left before I saw him this morning. He was awake, I just couldn't bring myself to talk to him, because I'm completely useless at talking through things like a normal person--"

“Thomas.” Margaret’s words cut him off. “Do not insult yourself in my presence. I will not stand for it.” Tommy actually laughed at that. “And don’t laugh at me either, young man. I will call Dr. Puffy and make her give you a scolding.”

“You don’t even know if I still see Puffy, what if I’ve switched therapists since then?” Margaret’s eyes crinkled into a smile, a teasing tilt to her lips the only thing that gave away that she was not seriously upset.

“She’ll do it anyway, you know how she is.” Tommy choked back another sob that tried to claw its way out of his chest.

“Yeah- I know how she is.”

“So what happened to your arm? Why’s it all weird like that?” Evan asked, squinting at Tommy’s scars. Margaret went to scold him, but Tommy spoke first.

“Fell asleep in a volcano and melted. 0/10, do not recommend.” Tommy teased, giving his ex-brother a wink.

“A volcano? Is that what you’re going with?” Evan rolled his eyes. “Keep your secrets, then. Does it hurt bad? Looks like it would sting like a bitch.” Tommy laughed at the exasperated look that crossed Margaret’s face, but his mouth snapped shut as soon as the look focused on him. It felt like home for a brief second.

“That language is entirely your fault. He did not learn that from me.”

“He’s fifteen! I am not the only person to ever swear in front of him!” Tommy defended, a half-grin finding its way into his face despite himself.

Margaret’s eyes softened, and she mumbled, “Oh, there he is,” before smiling and squeezing Tommy’s hand lightly. “Perhaps not, but he didn’t start doing it in front of me until *you* started to. Ever since, my innocent little child has been nothing but a heathen.”

“Your innocent little child burnt down a chemistry lab, he was born a heathen. Must have been the environment in which he was raised.” Tommy joked. His heart ached in his chest at how soft she was, but it wasn’t screaming out for her anymore, no, it was begging to be back with *his* family, with his older brothers who sang him songs and told him stories and took their tea with far too much sugar. With Phil, who pretended to like his coffee black but always snuck in a heaping spoonful of caramel syrup and a splash of cream when he thought nobody could see. With quiet mornings and biting remarks and fights that were always forgiven, because while the anger was real, the love was far, far stronger. He missed them, so fiercely it burned, and he’d only been gone an hour. How on earth could he live with this for the rest of his life?

“I didn’t even get in trouble for that!” Evan protested with an eye roll and a pout.

“No, because I told them it was me, you little monster. We’re lucky we didn’t both get expelled.” Evan laughed, shaking his head.

“You chose to do that, T, I didn’t ask you to.”

“Both of you are giving me grey hair.” Margaret deadpanned. Tommy snorted, glancing at her with a sly grin.

“Good thing I left then, you don’t have many hairs left to grey.” Margaret winced, but Tommy knew she understood what he was saying anyway. He wouldn’t say it out loud, he didn’t need to, not to her, but the silence left them with the understanding that it was forgiven, that there was no anger left to be had at how they parted ways. He wondered when he forgave her. He couldn’t tell when the anger had turned to acceptance, he just knew that it wasn’t here anymore. Evan never quite got Tommy like Margaret did, though, so his face fell at the joke.

“I’m really sorry about what I said, T. I was just angry, I shouldn’t have...”

“Don’t apologize, little man. Nobody’s mad anymore. It’s okay.” Evan flushed red, but nodded anyway.

“Why were you crying, then?”

“I.. messed up, at my new house. Said some things that shouldn’t have been said,” Tommy explained gently. “I made a real mess of what could have been home to me.”

“Well, apologize then, duh,” Evan rolled his eyes, as if it were obvious. And it was, to him, Tommy thought. Evan had never had to filter through homes, never had to worry if one misstep would land him back in the pits, vying for a new family when he messed up. He’d only ever known one home, had always had his parents there to forgive him after he screwed up.

“I don’t know if that’ll work for me, bud.” Evan frowned at that, but his reply was cut off by the cry of none other than Wilbur, who had burst through the door and was barreling toward Tommy before the kid could even speak. Tommy jumped to his feet, pulling his hand out of Margaret’s and staring at the man who was approaching.

“Toms, please, don’t-“ Wilbur wrapped his arms around Tommy, pressing his face into his hair and shaking so violently Tommy wondered if he would collapse where he stood. “-don’t go, please, we’re sorry, I’m sorry, we shouldn’t have shouted, we should have stopped you, but please, *please don’t go*.” Tommy laughed incredulously at his brother, who had yet to let go, looking over at Margaret to see if she was as confused as he was. She just gave him a soft smile, and flipped her phone around to show Tommy the text messages on her screen, nothing from her but ‘he’s here’ and an address, *this* address, and the reply from Phil himself saying ‘we’ll be there soon.’ He mouthed the word ‘traitor’ to her, and she fairly beamed at him and gestured to Wilbur.

“Hey, big man, I actually do need to breathe some time this year,” Tommy teased, pulling back a bit. Wilbur loosened his hold, but did not let go, instead tucking Tommy against his chest and muttering too quiet for anyone to hear. “Wil?” Wilbur finally pulled back, his hands still on Tommy’s shoulders, and he looked terrible. His face was blotchy and red, tears were streaming down his face, and his already unruly hair was still unbrushed, as it was that morning.

“God, Toms, we were so worried. You left without even saying *goodbye*. ”

“He’s good at that,” Evan drawled behind them, and Tommy barked out a laugh.

“ *You* are the one who wanted me gone, little monster, you don’t get to be mad that I didn’t say goodbye.” Evan shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets and rolling on his feet a bit.

“Didn’t really mean it, did I? Who’s this?” Wilbur looked at the kid, contemplative for a second before turning and sticking his hand out.

“Wilbur Watson. I’m Tommy’s brother.” Evan shook his hand with just a little bit too much gusto.

“Evan. T’s... ex-brother, I guess. You look like trash.” Wilbur cracked a smile at that.

“Thanks, trash is what I was going for.”

“You succeeded, then,” Evan antagonized. Wilbur looked like he was going to reply, but Margaret cleared her throat, a smile playing on her lips, but something else, something full of worry, dancing in her eyes.

“You got here awfully quickly. I presume your father and brother came with you?” Wilbur’s eyes snapped to her, where she was dusting herself off from where she’d been kneeling.

“Oh, you must be Margaret,” Wilbur replied coldly. “I’ve heard of you.”

“All terrible things, I’m sure. Is your father here? I’d like to have a conversation with him.” Wilbur scowled, earning a half-hearted shove from Tommy, and nodded. “He’s outside talking with the social worker.”

“Excellent. If you’ll excuse us, then. Come on, Evan.”

“But! Mom!”

“No, come. We’ll stop back and say goodbye before we go home, okay?” She shot Tommy a look that said ‘you’d better still be here when we come back’ which Tommy nodded to, and they left the shop. Techno came in not long after they left, his eyes scanning the room before landing on Tommy and Wilbur. Tommy braced himself for anger, but when Techno approached, he looked all but fearful. Guilt ate at Tommy’s heart at the caution in the older’s eyes.

“You are so grounded when we get home, Theseus.” And against all odds, Tommy smiled. Genuinely smiled, and his heart soared.

“Absolutely and completely fair, honestly.”

—

When Tommy left, Wilbur half expected to break down then and there, but he was startled out of his own sorrow by a choked noise from Techno. Wilbur bit back his own grief and took Techno’s hands.

“It’s going to be alright, Tech.”

“How can you say that? He’s... he left. He didn’t even say goodbye, and he’s fucking gone! He’s going back to the fucking system and- and-” His voice cut off into sobbing, and Wilbur hugged him gently.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry, Tech, I wish I could fix it.” It was not often that Wilbur had to be the older brother. He *was* older, but Techno was always the mature one. Then Tommy came, and it felt like they took turns being the oldest, Techno and Tommy working in tandem to carry the weight of ‘protector’. Wil briefly wondered if Tommy had ever comforted Techno like he did Wil. He wouldn’t be surprised.

Thinking of Tommy hurt. It felt like failure. Wilbur considered calling him, asking him to come home and talk, but that felt useless, so instead, he held his remaining younger brother gently and let him cry into his shoulder.

When Phil came downstairs, they were still curled together, moved to the couch but still in the same vulnerable position. Tommy was not there. “Is he-”

“He left. He apologized and then he left to meet George.” Wilbur replied quietly, which only sent another round of heaving sobs through Techno. “Shh, it’s okay Tech. It’s gonna be alright.” Wilbur gave his dad a look that screamed ‘help me, I don’t want to keep lying to him’ but Phil couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“It’s not going to be alright, it’s going to be so *quiet*, I *hate* the quiet, I hate this, I don’t want him gone, I want him *home*, and *safe*,” Techno cried.

“I know, Tech, I know.” Phil was crying, too, but Wilbur didn’t offer him any comfort. Wil wasn’t mad at him, not really, but he was so close to crying himself, so he focused on Techno, crooning soft words into his hair and rubbing slow circles on his back.

Slowly, Techno calmed, and when he left the room to ‘clean up’, Phil took his seat. “How are you feeling, mate?” Wilbur took a deep breath and leveled Phil with a look.

“Feeling fantastic, Dad. Can’t you tell?” Phil winced.

“Yeah, a stupid question. What can I do?”

“Bring him home. Don’t sign him off to a system that doesn’t care about him. Fix it. Fix this,” Wilbur snapped, and okay, maybe he was a little mad.

“You know I don’t have that choice, Wil. If he wants to go-”



“Figure it out! I don’t care what you do!” Phil just sighed, placing his head in his hands.

When his phone pinged, it echoed through the house, making everyone jump. It was just a text from an unsaved number. ‘He’s here.’ and an address only a few blocks away. “Wilbur, get your brother and meet me in the car.” Wilbur looked up, like he was going to argue, but it died on his tongue. “We’re going to bring him home.”

Techno looked fully composed, no trace of the tears left on his face, nothing to give away the fact that he had been crying an hour prior save for a little rasp in his voice.

The drive was short, and Phil ignored any calls he received, which there were a shocking amount of, honestly, and when they pulled into the lot Wilbur was out of the car and into the building before the engine had even stopped. Phil would have followed, but George was there at the doorway, phone in hand and looking frustrated.

“Phil! Oh, thank god, you weren’t taking my calls!” He exclaimed, reaching out and shaking his hand. “Tommy is inside, but we... need to have a chat, first, before you go and see him.”

“Of course, let’s talk.”

They didn’t say much, really. George explained why he was there and that while there hadn’t been any real paperwork filled out, that if needed he could have Tommy rehomed within the week, but that Tommy didn’t really want to. Phil told him it wouldn’t be necessary, that Tommy was still very much welcomed in their home. Techno stayed silent, dutifully standing at his father’s side with a glare. When the door of the shop opened, a stern woman with a whining teenager glued to her side, Phil almost ignored her. But she was glaring at him, and marching directly toward them.

“Phil Watson! You’d better have a good- Evan, cover your ears- you had better have a very good fucking reason as to why Thomas is in that café, and not at home.”

“Ah- Margaret, I assume?”

“Who else? You-“ she glanced at Techno, who was frozen in place, and her voice lowered to something much quieter. “My apologies, Technoblade, I did not mean to startle you. Phil, why is your son crying and insisting he has, and I quote, fucked up?”

“We got into an argument. He called George.”

“Did it ever occur to you to *stop him*?” She sneered, “or were you too busy being angry at a traumatized child to think that maybe, just maybe, he needed some guidance?”

“I-“

“It wasn’t his fault. He did what he could,” Techno defended. Margaret spoke with a much gentler tone to him.

“Had he done what he could, Thomas would not be here. I don’t expect you to understand, not because you are unintelligent, but you are very young, but Phil is a grown man and needs to realize he has to be the one to step up and handle these situations. That responsibility is his alone.”

“I’m a grown man,” Techno deadpanned. “Tommy is not innocent in this either, he made the call, not us. Not that you have a leg to stand on here, since you sent him away yourself.”

“You may be legally an adult, but you are not yet what I would consider grown. You have plenty of growing left to do. My mistakes were my own and they are not ones I need to be reminded of. This is not a conversation that needs to involve you, and there is currently a child who is in desperate need of his brother in that café. I think it would be best if that’s where you were.” Techno glared, and Margaret looked neutrally at him back, but neither of them backed down.

“Fine,” Techno snapped, storming off towards the shop. Margaret turned her eyes back to Phil.

“You have done an excellent job raising him. He will be a fine man one day,” she complimented, which startled Phil.

“What?”

“I don’t believe I stuttered. Now, on to the matter of Thomas. You will need to tread carefully for the next several weeks. I know school is starting soon, so you will need to keep an eye on his grades. If they start slipping-“

“You don’t need to tell me how to parent.”

“I’m not telling you how to parent, I’m telling you how to parent *Thomas* . There is a clear and obvious distinction. If his grades start slipping, you need to increase his therapy appointments, and try to ensure he does his homework in a neutral area, not his bedroom. He will try to isolate himself, do not let him. Should you need advice on how to prevent that, I presume you have my number.”

“It’s not really your place to tell me how to raise my own son,” Phil snapped.

“He may be your son now, but he was *my* son first. I was the one who held him when he cried and spoke him down when he decided *living* was too much. I dug my grave, and I do not presume to still be his Mother, but I was, and I will not stop *caring* simply because he no longer lives with me. Swallow your pride, Phil Watson, before it drowns you where you stand.”

That speech sent Phil reeling. Had Tommy wanted to die? Would this be enough to bring those feelings back? Would he lose him again, over and over until it would finally be permanent?

“Tell me what I need to do.” And Margaret smiled at him, and did.

## Chapter 23

### Chapter Summary

The cafe conversations.

### Chapter Notes

Lmao, y'all really love Margaret, so have a short little filler before the family actually goes talks about what happened. (Well, sort of, the chapter is necessary for plot purposes tm but also I just love writing Margaret)

(Also thank you sm for the lovely comments, I appreciate them)

The six of them- George had left a little while ago- were sitting around a table in the cafe, and quickly they were realizing Margaret was not at all like they were expecting. The way Tommy had described her, in the few times he'd mentioned her, had painted a picture of a stern and intimidating woman, which she *was*, but neither of them was expecting quite how soft she was. Particularly with Tommy, Techno, Wilbur, who she seemed to be shockingly fond of. She seemed a little put off when speaking to Phil, more like what they expected, but even then there was a certain kindness in her words.

"Really, Thomas, you have to stop the picking," She scolded lightly, tapping her fingers against his hand, which he had been steadily pulling the cuticles from.

"You think I'm bad? Wilbur *bites* his off," Tommy whined, but stopped picking at his nails anyway. Wilbur glared at Tommy.

"That's a terrible habit," Margaret wrinkled her nose. "Here, I think I have-" She reached into her bag, digging around for a second before pulling out what looked like nail polish. "Here, Wilbur, try this, you can keep that, I have several." She handed the bottle over, and Wilbur raised an eyebrow.

“You think painting my nails is going to fix my anxiety?” He snorted.

“It’s super gross, tastes like dirt,” Evan sneered at the bottle like it personally offended him.

“That is the point, Evan. It’s bitter, it makes it so unpleasant to taste that it keeps you from biting your nails. It’s completely clear, so you don’t need to worry about it changing the color of your nails, if that’s what you’re worried about. Not that there’s anything wrong with men painting their nails, but I know how young boys can be when it comes to doing anything to ‘damage’ their image.”

“Uh- yeah, thanks, I guess.” Wilbur pocketed the bottle. Tommy smirked at Wil, who had gone just the slightest bit pink.

“Of course.” She smiled at him, and the pink darkened a little. “Thomas, stop teasing. I’m sure your brothers would love to hear-”

“I’ll stop, I’ll stop! We don’t need to bring it up!” Tommy laughed, and Margaret winked at Phil, who gave her a small smile back.

“Well, I don’t know about any of you, but I need a refill. How do you all take your drinks?”

“Oh- you don’t need to-”

“That’s not necessary-” Wilbur and Techno started, but Tommy cut them off.

“Wil wants earl grey with three sugars, Techno likes the Jasmine with honey.” They glared at him.

“Thank you, dear. And you, Phil?”

“Oh, uh, dark roast coffee, black.” She raised an eyebrow at that.

“Thomas, how does your father like his coffee?” Tommy laughed. Margaret was a little *too* good at reading people sometimes.

“Caramel syrup and light cream.”

“I’ll be back in just a second, then.” And she left.

“Oh my god, how did you live with her? I feel like she’s staring into my soul!” Wilbur whined.

“Try being related to her sometime.” Evan snorted. “I have never gotten away with a single thing in my life.”

“Hey, we got away with all kinds of cool shit when I was there!”

“We literally didn’t. There isn’t a chance in hell she didn’t know exactly what we were doing at every moment in time.”

“Fair, honestly.”

“No, but actually. How do you even deal with that? She’s so... much.” Techno groaned. “I feel like I could tell her my favorite color and she’d know what I want to do with my life.”

“You get used to it,” Tommy deadpanned.

“She seems... nice,” Phil said quietly.

“Oh, you got mommed, didn’t you?” Tommy laughed. “She give you the ol’ stand in a corner and think about what you’ve done speech?”

“She might as well have, yeah,” Phil admitted with a laugh of his own, but it was still a little subdued.

“Rest in Peace,” Tommy said solemnly. “There lies Phil Watson, we hardly knew ye.”

“Thomas, behave yourself.” Margaret faux-scolled, setting down a tray of drinks. “Okay, one hot chocolate for Evan, one Dirty Chai latte- yes it has extra cinnamon, Thomas-, one Earl Grey, one honey Jasmine, one Dark Roast coffee with caramel and cream.” She took the last cup herself, and Tommy wondered if it was the same Mocha she had always gotten. Judging from the color, it was. She glanced over at Techno, assessing for a second before apparently deciding she had something to say. “Technoblade, dear, you are in desperate need of a haircut.” Techno tensed up, defensive, but Margaret continued on, “Those split ends are absolutely criminal, it’ll never grow longer if you don’t keep up with it.”

“It hasn’t been my priority, lately,” He huffed, sinking down in his chair. “Besides, I’m surprised you don’t think it’s unbecoming for me to have long hair or something.” Tommy shot him a confused look at his bitter tone.

“Why on earth would it be unbecoming? *I* have long hair, too, that would be awfully hypocritical of me,” She laughed, gesturing at her own hair as if proving her point.

“Yeah, but I’m a guy, so-”

“What does that have to do with anything? Last I checked hair length was not an indication of one’s gender. And beyond that, your hair is bubblegum pink, dear, I don’t think it’s the length that’s catching anyone’s eye.”

“What’s wrong with pink?” Techno snapped.



“I must have missed the part where I said there was something wrong with it,” Margaret replied flatly. “It suits you quite well, actually.” Margaret hummed. “It seems a very fitting color for an English major. They’re all a bit eccentric, aren’t they?” Techno looked up at her, baffled. Tommy could see the mischief in her eyes.

“How could you possibly know I’m an English major!?” She outright laughed at that.

“Relax, relax, I’m only teasing. You’re in one of my sister’s classes, and she’s spoken of you before. I assure you I did not actually assess your life’s ambitions from your choice of hair dye, there was just so little chance that there was another Technoblade running around.”

“Oh.”

“You’re intending to be an author, then? Or do you plan on going into teaching?”

“I uh, yeah. I want to write.”

“You’ll be quite good at it, I’m sure. I’ll have to look out for your books when I’m in the shops in a few years.” Techno flushed bright red at the compliment.

“Oh, er... Thanks.”

“Ma, stop teasing,” Tommy mocked. If the other four noticed the nickname, they did not call it out.

“I’m done, I’m done,” She smiled. She was never one to let awkwardness stand in the way of her maintaining a conversation. “But what of you, Thomas, have you decided on a major yet?”

“I’m not going to university,” He rolled his eyes. She *knew* that.

“Oh? I’m surprised, I had assumed by now you would have changed your mind.” Tommy grit his teeth. He knew what she was doing, trying to tell him to settle down and stay in one place, but he wasn’t going to rise to the bait.

“Nah, I don’t think it’s really for me.”

“Hmm. I suppose you could always get a trade job. Or comedian, you’ve always been one for telling jokes.” Tommy rolled his eyes.

“I’m going to deliver pizzas for the rest of my life.”

“That’ll make your car smell wonderful after a while, I’m sure.”

“Then I’ll rob banks.”

“Be sure to remember your mask, then. Wouldn’t want to be recognized.”

“I’m going to run a mafia.”

“Perhaps your father will buy you your first suit.”

“I’m going to be a stripper.”

“I have some heels you can borrow.” The rest of the table was watching the back and forth with varying looks of bemusement. Only Evan looked unsurprised.

“A pirate.”

“You always did like the parrots at the zoo.”

“A serial killer.”

“Not much money in that, but I suppose you could rob your victims.”

“Going to play the lottery and win it big.”

“Try casinos, too. You have a wonderful poker face.”

“An actor.”

“I’ll be at your premiers.”

“A professional drag racer.”

“Again, I have heels you can borrow.”

“Not that kind of- Oh you old bat!” She laughed, and the trance was broken.

“I’m sure you’ll be wonderful at whatever you choose, love.”

“Not the serial killer, though,” Evan added happily. “You’re too loud for that.” Wilbur snorted.

“Or the pirate. Can you imagine him on a boat? He’d fall overboard.”

“Please try the drag thing, I need blackmail images of you in heels to show my grandkids one day,” Phil quipped. Techno stayed silent.

“I actually have some pictures of him in full makeup somewhere, Phil, if you want them,” Margaret grinned.

“Nope! Okay! I think it’s time for this chat to come to an end!” Tommy screeched.

“Actually, you’re probably correct. We do have to be home soon.” Margaret stood up, and Tommy stood with her, giving her a hug. He mumbled a quiet,

“Thank you,” to her and pulled away.

“Of course, love. Feel free to call any time. And if something like this happens again, please, call me before you start planning your great escape. You know we’ll always be there to talk some sense into you.” She ruffled his hair a bit, and then scrunched up her nose. “And take a shower, your hair is absolutely filthy.” Tommy scowled at her. “Phil, please do stay in contact. It was nice meeting you boys. Have a wonderful evening. Come now, Evan.”

Evan pulled Tommy into a quick hug and followed his mother out of the shop.

“I hate her. Oh my god, do I hate her,” Techno groaned, laying his head down on his arms. “She’s the worst person I’ve ever met.”

“She’s not that bad,” Tommy frowned. “She didn’t even say much to you.”

“She said enough,” Techno glared.

“Oh, stop being whiny. She seemed... nice, I guess,” Wilbur shrugged. “I wouldn’t have lasted a week with her as my foster though.”

“I wouldn’t have lasted a day,” Techno deadpanned. Tommy felt a spark of annoyance at that but shoved it down.

“Good thing you got Phil, then, eh?” Tommy asked, but it felt half-hearted at best.

“Can we go home? I’ve had my fill of social interaction for the year,” Techno asked. He *did* look a bit on edge. Phil nodded.

“Sure, let’s go home.”

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Summary

They talk.

## Chapter Notes

How is this somehow the closest to fluff this fucking fic has had so far?

Fun fact- the original plan for this was to be 50k words. We have now passed 60k and we still have like, several things that have to happen before the end.

Also I appreciate your very kind comments, they mean the world.

The car ride home was... awkward. Tommy expected *some* awkwardness, since Margaret was really the only one fixing it before, but there was an anxious energy between the three older men, like they were having a conversation and Tommy was just out of hearing range. When they pulled into the driveway Tommy could feel his own anxiety spike. Everyone got out of the car silently and it wasn't until Tommy awkwardly stood in the doorway behind them that anyone actually spoke.

"Why don't we all go sit in the dining room?" Phil asked, glancing around at his three sons. They all followed him, sitting in their respective chairs. "Now, I know we're all probably a little... Tired after the events of today, but I think it's important we actually talk about what happened."

"I'm sorry," Tommy said, feeling a bit nauseous. Everyone's eyes were on him. "I shouldn't have lost my temper, and I should have actually had a conversation with you this morning before just bailing. I wasn't thinking about how it would affect anyone else, and I should have. The fight shouldn't have happened in the first place. I know you were just trying to look out for me."

“Do you? Do you actually know that, or are you just saying that because you think that’s what we want to hear?” Techno asked, his voice bitter. Phil winced and shot Techno a reprimanding look.

“Tech-”

“No, I’m not being a dick here, I’m actually asking. Tommy. Do you know why Phil said no, do you understand that he was trying to help? Or do you just think you should have backed down because that’s what you’ve been told to do in that situation? Do you actually, genuinely believe we care about you, or do you just know *you* care about *us* and think it doesn’t matter how we feel?”

“I- well...” Tommy frowned. “I guess I never really thought about it like *that*.”

“Think about it now, then.” And Tommy did. Even with all of the evidence in front of him that these people cared about him, did he believe it? Or was he expecting it to be taken away at a moment’s notice like it had always been in the past? He knew the answer, but he also knew it was unfair of him to feel like that when they’d never really given him reason to doubt them.

“I... I don’t. I don’t think you really care about me. Or.. I don’t believe you do. Even though I *know* it’s unfair, that you’ve done nothing but be kind and caring toward me since I came here, and I know it’s stupid to doubt you, I just... I don’t know. I’m sorry.” Tommy rubbed at his face absently. “You all are a family, and I guess... I just don’t see how I could fit into that. I don’t know why you would want me to.”

“Toms, of *course*-”

“Wait, no, Dad. We need to talk through it more,” Techno cut in. “Tommy. Tell us why you don’t believe us. Give us reasons.”

“I... because I’m me?”

“No. *Elaborate.*” Tommy swallowed.

“Because... because I’m *too much*. I’m annoying and selfish and I have so many problems and I get frustrated at simple things and I shut down when I get overwhelmed and I snap at you guys and I... I’m not worth the worry I put anyone who tries to care about me through. There are billions of people who have it worse than me but I still can’t get over stupid, simple shit that happened years ago. Because even when I try to help I always fuck it up worse.” Tommy couldn’t bear to look at anyone, so he stared at his hands where they were clasped in his lap. “Because all I do is poison everything I touch and no matter how much I try to be better I’m always going to be bad.”

“Can you give us examples? Tell us what you’ve done, specifically, to us that makes you feel like that’s true.”

“I... I scared you my *second* day here. When I had that panic attack for no reason. And then, I made you leave class on my *fourth* day here to help me *through* a panic attack that I should have been able to deal with on my own. That I shouldn’t have had in the first place. I- I assumed the worst of Phil even when he’d never done anything to warrant it. I make shitty jokes at everyone’s expense instead of just telling you what I actually think because actually talking about how I feel makes me feel fucking gross, so it’s easier to just pretend like I don’t care. I get caught up in my own head and treat you, Wil and Techno, like you’re people who can’t take care of themselves even though it’s not true, because in my mind I’m the one who knows how the world really is and I see you as naive for seeing the best in people because I *can’t* see the best in people, which really, is unfair of me since the reason I’ve had such a shit go of it is because I just bring out the *worst* in people.

I make you do things you don’t want to do just because I think it’s better for you, but I get mad when anyone tries to do that for me. I snuck out of the house and got a job even though Phil told me not to, I picked at Wilbur until he snapped when I knew that he would be particularly fragile after drinking, after I literally told him that he was going to be in a bad mood, then refused to apologize because I’m a stubborn asshole. What should have been a short-lived and petty argument went on so long that it ended with everyone losing all of their shit and almost dying because I couldn’t just accept the obvious olive branches that were extended. I lie to you over and over about how much pain I was -am- in because in my head it’s something I shouldn’t have to bother you with, which just leaves everyone *more* worried because I’m a shit liar, and even though I know that, I still do it because I’m fucking *stupid* and it’s easier to tell myself that you don’t care than accept that I somehow tricked you all into thinking I’m better than I actually am. Because it doesn’t matter how much good I do or have done, I’m still, underneath all of the facades, an angry, fucked up kid who lashes out at people instead of empathizing.” Tommy let out a bitter laugh. “Because I don’t deserve your fucking kindness. Because even though you’ve given me everything I could ever ask for, a



home, a *family*, I still know that the second I graduate school I'm going to pile everything I own into a car and leave, because I'm a selfish prick who prioritizes some fucked up promise I made to myself as a kid above everything I've been given and everyone who wants better for me."

"Okay, Theseus. Now it's our turn to talk," Techno grimaced. "Let's start with the beginning. That first panic attack. You said we were scared. That's not- well no, it is true, but we weren't scared *of* you, we were scared *for* you. Because you're a kid who has been through so much shit in your life that you have learned how to shove down your own panic with nobody's help because you thought you should have to. We were scared because it was the first sign that there was far, far more wrong than we would ever be able to see. But you still sat at the table and spoke to us and pretended like you were okay because you didn't want us to know you were hurting. You treated us well even when you thought we were *literally* starving you instead of lashing out, which would have been an appropriate response to that situation. You pretended like everything was fine while thinking Phil had physically hurt Wilbur because as you saw it, we wanted to protect our Dad. You risked your own safety for the comfort of complete strangers, strangers who you thought were complacent in your own danger."

"But there *was* no danger!"

"Does that matter? Does it matter that that wasn't what was happening? Because it was real then, to you, wasn't it?"

"I... guess so?"

"Right. And then the panic attack. The big one. You said you made me leave class, but you *didn't*. You never called, never asked me to help you. Dream called me, and I *chose* to come."

"You came *because of me*. "

"No. I came because of me. Because I've been there, scared and afraid and needing someone to help me come back to reality. Which you know, because you've been the one to help me a thousand times since then. In any of those situations, where you talked me down or distracted me from my own shit, did you ever feel like I was *making* you do it?"

"Well, no, but-"

“No buts. It’s exactly the same, Theseus. You help me, you help Wil, help Dad, because you choose to. Not because you’re being forced to.”

“I’ve never done much, though.”

“How many times have you stopped doing your homework, came home from spending time with your friends, dropped everything just because we called?”

“I- I don’t know?”

“Dozens of times, easily, for me. Just as many for Wil, if not more. Probably at least a handful of times for Dad, too, even if it’s not the same way. How many times have you made sure to make us a hot drink just the way we like it when you think we’re stressed, how many times have you sat and helped us understand something we couldn’t figure out on our own even though you had your own work to do? How many times have you gone into Dad’s office to remind him to take a break when he was overworking?”

“How many times have you had our backs, even when you didn’t think we’d have yours? How many secrets of ours have you kept when you never expected anything in return?” Wil added. “Even that first night, you found me smoking on the roof and never mentioned it to Dad, you just stayed up and made sure I made it back inside okay before going to sleep yourself. How many times did you check up on me to make sure I was okay even though you didn’t know me from Adam?”

“But I didn’t do those things because I cared, I just did them because I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I fucked up your lives in the process of fucking up my own.”

“We all know that isn’t true. You didn’t do anything to cause the problems we already had when you arrived, but you still helped anyway, because *that’s* who you are, Tommy.”

“You walked me home when I was too drunk to form a coherent sentence even though it risked Dad finding out about your job, instead of just leaving me to find my own way home.”

“Of course I did, who the fuck leaves a drunk person on their own just because it mildly inconveniences them?” Tommy snorted.

“Most people. Nearly everyone would have thought of their own safety first, but you *didn't*. You just walked me home and told me to do better, and not even for *your* sake. You told me to do better because you didn't want me hurt. You always, *always*, put us first.”

“Fat lot of good that did, when I literally pushed you to your breaking point less than 24 hours later.”

“You were trying to *help*. That fight wasn't your fault and we both know it! I was horrible to you and you *still* defended me, while I was literally saying horrible shit to you, you told Techno, who scares you, off instead of just letting him give me shit for being an asshole to you! And even though I was *horrible* to you, you *still* saved my life, *still* nearly died to save Techno's when he wasn't talking to you either! How can you act like that wasn't selfless?”

“Whatever! Shitty people can do things that aren't awful sometimes and still be bad!”

“Sure, but in that same vein, *good* people can mess up and still be good. *You* could never be bad. You can do bad things, sure, but you are inherently a *good person*. You've proved yourself over and over again to *be* a good person. How could we *not* love you, Tommy, when you've given us nothing but love over and over and over again even when, in your eyes, we'd done nothing to deserve it? When we messed up countless times, you still loved us, still sung our praises, and did everything in your power to help us grow. How could we *not* love you, when you showed up and made us *better*? ” Wilbur laughed incredulously. “Sure, you're a right annoying prick sometimes, sure, you do things that we don't like, but in the end, everything you've done has been something to benefit us in the end. You- you fucking made us tea and apologized for *scaring us* ten minutes before you left, even though you thought we'd never fucking see each other again! Even when you thought we were just going to let you go, you still *put us first*. How the hell could you possibly think you were anything but an incredible, kind, selfless human being when you prove yourself to be nothing short of amazing every day?”

“What Wil is saying, Theseus, is that whether or not you think you deserve it, we *do* love you, and we aren't going to stop just because you mess up, okay? Because no matter how you see yourself, no matter what anyone else has told you, we know you, the real you, and even if you do fuck up, even if you leave come summer and never say another word to us, we're not giving up on you. No piece of paper, no amount of time, no amount of mistakes are going to change that.”

“You’re family, mate. If we haven’t made that obvious yet, we’ll just have to keep trying until you believe us,” Phil said, quietly. “There aren’t any magic words I can say to fix this, if there were I would, would fix this, would go back in time and save you from all the shit that’s hurt you, but we’re here now, Tommy, and we aren’t going anywhere. We’re all human, we all mess up sometimes, God knows we all have, but our mistakes aren’t what define us. They aren’t what defines you.” And maybe it was just how long of a day it had been, or maybe Tommy was just tired of being strong, but he burst into tears at those words. “Oh, sweetheart,” Phil crooned, quickly standing and wrapping around the table until he was kneeling next to Tommy. Tommy didn’t even think, just launched himself into Phil’s open arms and clung to him like a lifeline.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry for scaring you. I love you, I love all of you, I wish I could take it back, you’re not just another family, I didn’t mean it, I’m *sorry*.”

“Hey, hey. It’s okay buddy, we know. We all know you didn’t mean it, okay? We all forgive you.”

“Well...” Techno drawled from where he was now sitting next to Tommy and Phil. Wilbur glared at him. “Kidding, kidding. I forgive you, kid.”

“I forgive you too, even if there’s nothing to forgive,” Wilbur said softly. Tommy sniffled from where he was still curled into Phil’s arms.

“Thank you,” He croaked, and everyone knew what he meant.

## Chapter 25

### Chapter Summary

This chapter sucks and is very short. I haven't updated in ages and felt bad so get some weepy Wilbur. Next update coming soon and it will be less bad I promise lol.

Tommy's first day of his last year of school was, frankly, exhausting. His entire body ached, and all he really wanted was to sleep, but instead, he was sitting through another syllabus reading and trying desperately to keep his eyes open. Mrs. Bolock was explaining how the class would go, that they would watch a movie then have to do an essay on it, but Tommy could barely hear her over the buzzing in his ears.

"-ommy? Mr. Shroud, look at me," her voice suddenly cut through. He looked up at her warily, and grimaced at the disapproving look she was giving him. "Really, Tommy, I know it's just the syllabus, but this is what sets the course for the entire class. It's important you pay attention."

"Sorry, ma'am," Tommy muttered, trying to ignore the snickers from his classmates. She fixed him with a look and nodded, going back to explaining the class's grading scale.

When he finally made it home, he didn't even quite make it to the couch before collapsing. He hit his knees less than a foot away, though, so he laid his torso into the cushions and kept his eyes closed tightly as he heard Wilbur taking his shoes off. When Wilbur came into the living room, he made a panicked noise and was at Tommy's side in an instant.

"Toms? What's going on? Are you okay?" His voice sounded nearly an octave too high.

"I feel like I'm dying," Tommy groaned. "I'm so tired, Wil."

"L-let's get you up on the couch, okay?" Wilbur said softly, carefully pulling Tommy up and helping him sit. He did not miss the way Tommy shook. "Tommy, what's going on?"

“I, nothing. I’m just in a lot of pain today, I think,” Tommy groaned.

“Pain? Did something happen?” Tommy raised an eyebrow at him.

“Wilbur. I caught on fire like, four months ago. It’s not going to stop hurting just because it’s not bleeding anymore..” His doctors had explained it to him early on in the recovery process, the way that even once he’d healed externally, there would always be lingering pain. They said with time he would hurt less, but it would be chronic and likely always have lasting effects.

“What? The *burns* hurt?”

“Well, it’s... more like the scar tissue and muscles hurt, but yeah, essentially.”

“Should we call the doctor? I thought it was better!”

“Wil...” Tommy considered his options. He decided honesty would probably get him further than his bravado would. “It’s... it’s not going to get better. Not much, anyway.” Wilbur looked confused. “You know how people who have bad joints say they can feel when a storm is coming?” He nodded. “It’s sort of like that. The actual injury is gone, right? But it doesn’t go back to being 100% the same, there’s damage on a level that you can’t really fix. You just have to learn how to... deal with it.”

“What, so you’re still going to feel like you’re covered in burns? Forever?”

“No, no. It’s not- well, yeah, kind of. There’s always going to be some pain. It’s not as bad as when it first happened, and supposedly it’ll keep getting better as time goes on, but... yeah, I’m going to be in at least a little pain for probably the rest of my life.”

“But you’re *seventeen*! Surely you’re young enough that you’ll recover fully, right?”

“I... maybe if I were a normal 17-year-old. But I came here already with so many issues, and my body has already had to stitch itself back together so many times...” Tommy tapered off, giving Wil a small smile. “I eventually had to have some consequences for being a dumbass, I guess.” Wilbur looked heartbroken.

“I- does dad know? Techno?”

“Phil does, yeah. Tech might, but I’ve never talked to him about it or anything. I didn’t know you didn’t, honestly.”

“How would I have known? I- Jesus christ- *I ruined your life*, didn’t I?”

“It wasn’t your fucking fault, Wilbur. We aren’t having this discussion again.”

“We keep having this discussion because I keep finding out more and more things to be sorry for!”

“Wil, *please*, ” Tommy begged. “I can’t do this today. It wasn’t your fault, and I’m sorry, but I am so tired. I need to rest, I can’t-” His voice broke. “I can’t try to fix you right now.” Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut, for just a second, then nodded.

“You’re right, Tommy. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t put this on you. Thank you, for telling me how you’re feeling. Why don’t you try to nap a bit? I’ll make sure Tech and Dad don’t bother you.”

“Promise you aren’t going to go wallow the second I fall asleep?”

“I will keep my wallowing to a minimum. Might brood a little though,” Wilbur joked, running a hand through Tommy’s hair. “Sleep, Toms. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Tommy nodded, his eyes closing. It was only a few minutes before he relaxed, his breathing evening out.

Wilbur waited another few minutes before standing up. He made himself tea and texted Techno, asking when he'd be home.

He didn't get a reply, instead, half an hour later, he heard the car pull into the driveway. Techno came through the door just a few seconds later, his eyes flickering to Tommy before he came over to Wil.

"What happened?"

"I... he's in pain," Wilbur grimaced. "Did you know? That he'll be in pain for the rest of his life? That I fucked him up so bad that he'll never be okay again?" Techno winced.

"Yeah, Wil, I knew. Listen- I know you feel guilty, but-"

"But what? But it's not my fault and nobody blames me? But it was an accident and he made his choice? I've heard it all a thousand times, Tech. I know. But... but he's such a good kid, and he deserved better than to have to live forever with my mistake."

"I... look, I'm not going to tell you how to feel. I get it, you feel guilty. I do too. But, feeling guilty isn't going to change what happened. We can't go back and fix the shit that's already done. All we can do is be better."

"Why do we get to be better, when he doesn't?"

"Because life isn't fair. But you *can* get better, and I think you owe it to him to at least try," Techno sighed. "You know he doesn't want you to hate yourself over this. He loves you, He doesn't want you to feel like shit forever over something like this."



“You’re right,” Wilbur agreed, “But I don’t think I’ll ever stop feeling awful for it.”

“I’m not telling you to forget what happened. You shouldn’t. We learn to be better by remembering what happens when we aren’t. But we can’t let our past mistakes keep us from moving forward.”

“You were supposed to be there when I woke up,” Tommy pouted from the doorway, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “If there’s anything to be guilty about, it’s that.”

“Should you be up and moving?” Wilbur asked, a small frown on his face.

“You let me do it any other time, not sure why now would be any different,” Tommy had moved from the doorway to snatch Wil’s teacup and flipped his beanie over as he made his way to the kitchen. “Do you want more tea, or just want me to wash this out?” He called over his shoulder.

“I can wash it, you don’t need to do that.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Tommy groaned. “I’m fine now, just needed a power nap.” They heard the water turn on in the kitchen and Wilbur groaned.

“I hate how casual you act. Can you please be mad at me for this?”

“Yes, I’m absolutely furious that you stained the inside of this mug with your terrible tea,” Tommy laughed, walking back into the dining room. His face fell when he saw his brother’s grim expressions. “Guys, please. We don’t need to do this every time we find a new way that I’m fucked up. That’s what we have therapists for.” Techno snorted, but Wilbur just continued to look miserably guilty. “Oh for the love of *fuck*.” He groaned, pulling Wilbur’s chair out and grabbing his brother’s arm, forcing him to stand. He kept his hands on Wil’s shoulders and looked him in the eye. “I forgive you, for the fire, and everything that came from it. I forgive you for the fight, I forgive you for the burns, for the hospital, and for whatever else you feel guilty for, okay? You’re forgiven.” Wilbur did not expect to burst into tears at those words, but he did anyway. “Jesus Christ, Wil. Come here.” He pulled the older

into a hug, letting his brother sob into his shoulder. He rolled his eyes at Techno a little, but they both had fond smiles on their faces.

“Thank you,” Wilbur croaked.

“Don’t thank me, you fucking drama queen. Just stop feeling so awful all the time,” Tommy laughed, exasperated. “You’re my brother, of *course*, I forgive you. I never blamed you.” And then Wilbur was crying again. “Jesus, okay, can we move to the couch if you’re going to do this? Techno, you too. Let’s watch a movie or something.”

And if Phil came back to the three curled up together, nobody needed to know. Nobody needed to know about the half a dozen photos he’d taken, either.

# Chapter 26

## Chapter Summary

Tommy attends a Party

## Chapter Notes

This chapter has underage drinking. If that makes you uncomfortable, don't feel bad if you can't read it. I can give a short summary at the beginning of the next chapter if need be.

“Tommy.”

“No, Tubbo.”

“Please, it’ll be so fun!”

“Tubbo. I am in no way going to be allowed to go to a party. Phil gets stressed out if I’m three minutes late from *school*. ”

“But! Phil doesn’t have to know! We’ll just say we’re staying at Ranboo’s place for the weekend!”

“Which is great except this party is going to have all of my brothers’ friends there. You don’t think we’re gonna get clocked right away?”

“They literally invited us!”

“Probably assuming we’d not show up! Or if we did, we'd be doing so with *permission*.”

“Misters Smith and Shroud, can you at least pretend to be paying attention to my lesson?”  
The teacher snapped, looking exasperated.

“Yes, ma’am.” They said in unison. As soon as she turned around, Tubbo went back to pouting at Tommy.

“No!” Tommy hissed.

“But, please?”

“No, Tubbo.”

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Tommy stood outside the house where the party was, glaring at Tubbo, who was bouncing on his toes and grinning wildly.

“How the hell did you manage to talk me into this?”

“It’s because I’m cute!” Tubbo grinned, grabbing Tommy’s hand and yanking him through the door.

“Cute is not the word I would use to describe you.” Tommy deadpanned. The music was aggressively loud, and people were everywhere, drinking, smoking, and laughing. Tommy wrinkled his nose in distaste at the smell of stale booze and cigarettes. “It smells terrible in here.”

“You’ll get used to it!” Schlatt laughed, clapping a hand on Tommy’s shoulder. “Good to see you two here! Quackity said he’d invited you.”

“Schlatt,” Tommy replied, side-eyeing the man.

“Oh come on, loosen up, Tom! It’s a party! Here, have a drink.” Tommy was handed a bottle of... something. He’d guess vodka, but it was too dark to actually read the label.

“I don’t drink,” Tommy replied flatly, and Tubbo grabbed the bottle from his hands.

“I do!” He took a swig and shuddered as he swallowed. “Ugh, is that rum?”

“It is! Good guess, kid,” Schlatt laughed. Tubbo grinned easily.

“Ah yes, it was definitely a guess, as I’ve certainly never drank that same brand of rum in your living room.”

“We’re pretending that never happened because Eret would murder me.” Schlatt snorted. “Sure you don’t want some, Tommy?” He was obviously teasing.

“I. Don’t. Drink,” Tommy snapped anyway.

“Alright, alright, Jeez. I was just kidding. I’ll see you two later.” Schlatt disappeared into the crowd. Tubbo was frowning at Tommy.

“Why don’t you drink?”

“Because if I start drinking I won’t stop,” Tommy replied, grimacing. “Not really looking to lose another year of my life to blackouts on Tuesday afternoons. Come on, we’ll find you

something that isn't straight rum to drink."

"Oh, did you used to drink a lot then?" They were moving through the house now, looking for a kitchen or a table with booze.

"Yeah, before I moved in with Margaret. Haven't touched any since." They found the table, and Tommy poured a drink with practiced ease and handed it to Tubbo. "Don't let anyone else make you a drink. If you want more just let me know. If you lose sight of the drink for even a second don't drink it either. Not everyone here is your friend." Tommy thought of parties where he'd let people he barely knew pour him drinks and grimaced. There were lots of nights drinking straight liquor with just enough mixer to change the color that came to mind, and he marveled at the fact he didn't end up dead somewhere.

"You didn't have to come if it's going to make you uncomfortable," Tubbo said, frowning. "I just thought you didn't want to get in trouble."

"Nah, parties don't bother me. I'm in my element here, honestly, just give me a few minutes to get used to it. I'm not uncomfortable, just watching out for you," Tommy shrugged. Someone's arm slung over Tommy's shoulder, and suddenly a very tipsy Quackity was grinning at them.

"Hey, guys!" Tommy took a deep breath and suddenly it was like a flip had switched, and he melted into someone they almost didn't recognize, all confidence and mischief.

"Big Q! How's it going, big man?"

"Good, good! Lil drunk!"

"I see that, what the hell are you drinking?"

"Just something Sap mixed me. What about you?"

“Tubs is drinking a vodka Redbull, I’m the sober one tonight.”

“Bummeerrr. If you decide to get drunk you two can stay here, plenty of spare couches to crash on!”

“For sure, man. I’ll let ya know!”

“Cool cool cool. See you!” Then he was stumbling away, but Tommy didn’t drop the act. He grinned at Tubbo, rolling his eyes.

“Dunks, I swear.” Tubbo laughed, and they made their way into the crowd again.

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“Tommmmyyyy! I’m out of my drink!” Tubbo whined, popping up behind Tommy with a giggle. The girl Tommy was chatting to raised her eyebrows and shot Tommy a smirk.

“Okay, Tubster, let’s get ya something. You need anything while we’re over there?” Tommy asked the girl with an eye roll.

“I’m okay! Nice meeting you, though, if I don’t see you again tonight!”

“You too,” Tommy nodded, and pulled Tubbo towards the table, laughing at the way he stumbled. “You’re absolutely wasted, man. You gotta pace yourself, we’ve only been here a few hours.”

“M not wasted, you’re just *sober*, ” Tubbo whined. “Could drink you under the table.”

“Tubs I could drink this whole building under the table and still walk in a straight line. You’ve had like four drinks.”

“B-bully,” Tubbo grinned. Tommy laughed and handed him a bottle of water.

“Bet you thirty dollars you can’t take a shot of Patron without making a face,” a guy in a green tank top smirked at Tommy.

“I could drink the whole bottle without making a face, but I’m not going to prove it to you,” Tommy replied flatly, pouring Tubbo another drink while he finished his water.

“C’mon man, too chicken to try? Afraid one little drink’s gonna get you white girl wasted?” Tommy clenched his teeth and ignored him. “Oh, what? Too good to talk to me? Too much of a *baby* to live a little?”

“I have nothing to prove to you, dude.”

“Sure, sure,” The guy teased, holding out the bottle. “Thirty bucks, and all you’ve gotta do is take a little drink.” Tommy sighed and reached his hand out.

“Wait, Tommy, you said-”

“It’s fine, Tubbo. Just one drink isn’t going to kill me.” He took the bottle. “Get your wallet out, bitch.” The guy did, pulling out a twenty and a ten and holding it out. Tommy sniffed the tequila and scrunched up his nose a bit. “Ugh. Bottoms up.” He lifted it to his lips, and as he said, he swallowed a few swigs like it was water. A familiar warmth filled his stomach when he pulled it away, completely blank-faced. He took the money from the guy’s hand while both he and Tubbo looked at him with identical faces of disbelief. “What?”

“Uh, that was ver-very concerningly easy for you,” Tubbo replied.



“Duuude, that was sick!” The other guy said, grinning. Tommy grimaced.

“Nothing cooler than teenage alcoholism. Go away.” The guy just laughed, leaving the two standing there. Tubbo looked uncomfortable. “What, Tubbo?”

“So-sorry. I just, just thought you were exaggerating when you said you drank a lot.”

“Tommy! Why the hell is Jared telling everyone you drink like a pro?” Schlatt said, appearing out of nowhere to their left.

“Because I do. What do you want?” Tommy had dropped the happy facade in favor of feeling a little bit like an idiot for falling to peer pressure.

“I thought you didn’t drink?”

“I don’t, anymore. The dude wouldn’t leave it, so I shut him up. Made thirty bucks on it too,” Tommy held up the cash with an eye roll.

“Dude, if he was bothering you, why didn’t you just have someone come over and shut him up?”

“I can take care of myself. Besides, I’m fine.” Tommy shrugged. “Takes a lot more than a little tequila to set me on my ass.” Schlatt looked uncomfortable.

“Look, kid. You don’t need to prove anything, you can just let someone know if you’re uncomfortable.”

“Dude, I said it was fine.”

“Well, let me know if he bothers you again, yeah?” Tommy sighed.

“Yeah, I’ll let you know. Thanks, I guess.”

“Yeah, no problem kid.” Schlatt vanished again, and Tommy steeled his nerves and let himself slip back into party mode.

“C’mon, let’s go be social or whatever.”

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It was not the last time Jared bothered him. Less than twenty minutes later he reappeared with a few friends and a bottle of whiskey. Tommy fought down the urge to groan. He glanced around, but neither Tubbo nor Schlatt were nearby. In fact, he didn’t recognize hardly anyone around him beyond one guy who he was pretty sure hung around Dream, but he didn’t remember his name.

“Bet you another thirty you can’t drink *this* without making a face!” Jared grinned, looking at his friends like it was hilarious.

“Dude, what is your deal? Why does it matter if I can drink?” Tommy hated whiskey. It always reminded him too much of being 14 and drunk in a field with people he only pretended to like. Reminded him too much of drunken sneers and fights he never had a chance of winning.

“You thought you were so badass with the Tequila, but *nobody* can drink this without looking like an idiot.” Tommy groaned. Maybe it was just the way the tequila had dulled his sense, but he found himself shrugging.

“Grab some shot glasses then, bitch boy. Let’s prove a point.” Jared grinned triumphantly and pulled two shot glasses from his friend’s hand. Tommy held out his hand for the bottle and poured them each a shot. He raised his and tapped it to Jared’s and swallowed, not letting it

touch his tongue. Jared shivered from head to toe, but Tommy just stood there, watching him with disinterest.

“Oh holy shit, you weren’t kidding, dude. Like water,” One of Jared’s friends laughed. “Want to do another?” He asked Tommy, who sighed.

“Sure. Just one, though. I still need to stay sober so I can make sure my friend gets home okay.” He poured another drink, and the guy took it with a grin. Just as they were going to drink them, Tommy heard a voice behind him.

“ *Tommy?* ” It was Dream. Tommy took the shot quickly then turned to look at him, an easy grin on his face.

“What’s up, man?”

“Are you *drinking?*” Dream looked almost mad.

“Only a little. By the way, bitch boy, you owe me money,” Tommy held out his hand expectantly, and Jared groaned before depositing the bills into his palm.

“You suck, dude.”

“Yep. Buh-bye, now.” Jared and his friends left, them teasing him for losing to a kid as they went. Tommy turned back to Dream. “God, what an asshole.”

“Dude, why the hell are you drinking? Isn’t that like, a big no for you?”

“Eh, it’s more of a guideline rather than a hard and fast rule, apparently,” Tommy laughed. “You seen Tubbo? Haven’t seen him in like ten minutes.”

“Wait, no, don’t change the subject. You have literally told me before that you don’t drink.”

“Eh, sixty dollars is worth it, I think.”

“ *Dude.* ”

“Dream, my friend. It’s a party. People are gonna have a few drinks. It’s *fine.* ”

“Should I call your brother to come get you?”

“Do I look like I need to be collected?”

“I- no, not really. You kinda look the same as you always do.”

“Yeah, exactly. I’m fine. Help me find Tubbo. Dumbass is probably absolutely sloshed by now.” Dream shook his head but followed Tommy through the house. They found Tubbo leaning on Schlatt on the couch. Schlatt shot Dream a look, and apparently, they had a silent conversation, because then he looked at Tommy and frowned. “Hey, Schlatt. Want me to take him? He looks like he’s about ready to go home.”

“Nah, he’s fine. How.. are you feeling?” Tommy raised an eyebrow.

“I’m fine? I’m a big man, aren’t I?” Schlatt’s eyes flashed dangerously.

“Did he come back?”

“Who, Jared? Yeah, the little bitch wanted to shoot whiskey, for some reason,” Tommy shrugged. “No big deal.”

“Dude, I told you to get me if something happened.”

“Didn’t know where you were,” Tommy replied, glancing around at the party. “I handled it.”

“By taking two shots,” Dream added flatly. “Really well handled.”

“Dude, Schlatt is literally on his third *bottle* of the night. Tubbo has had like six times as much as me. It’s fine.”

“Neither of them have expressed their complete distaste for drinking,” Dream argued.

“Well, I obviously changed my mind, didn’t I?” Tommy replied. He wasn’t anywhere near drunk, but there was enough alcohol in his system to relax whatever inhibitions he had against drinking. “Relax.”

“What, so if I offered you my bottle, you’d just drink it?” Schlatt asked, looking a little annoyed, but mostly concerned.

“Why, you offering?” Tommy teased. Schlatt held it out, obviously trying to call Tommy’s bluff. Tommy plucked it from his hands and took a generous swig.

“W-wait! Tommy, dude, you don’t like- Annnd you’ve done it. *Awesome.*” Schlatt groaned. Tommy just laughed, handing the bottle back.

“That tastes like shit, just so you know.” Dream sighed.

“Tommy, seriously, what are you doing?” Tommy just shrugged.

“Forgot how much I like drinking, I guess. It’s fun.”

“Fun until you’re hungover the next day. Isn’t that what you told Wil?”

“Wil’s a different case. Dude’s a stray hair out of place away from a breakdown at any given point.”

“And you aren’t?” Schlatt asked, incredulous.

“Nope. Can’t be on the verge of a breakdown if you’re always in the middle of one,” Tommy laughed.

“I... whatever dude. No more drinking.”

“Whatever you say, big man,” Tommy smirked and went off to find someone to talk to, leaving Tubbo, Schlatt, and Dream there.

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Tommy wasn’t sure how many drinks he had, but he was definitely buzzed now. Still not drunk, but he was feeling it a good bit more than he had originally. He was sitting next to Quackity, passing a bottle back and forth and talking in a circle with a few people. Sapnap was laying across Quackity’s lap, and Karl was leaning against both of them, both too drunk to form coherent sentences. He went to take another drink when it was suddenly pulled from his hands. Schlatt was looming over him, now looking *very* concerned.

“Q, how much has Tommy had to drink?”

“Uhh, I dunno? This is like our second fifth, we’ve been sharing.” Schlatt pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Can you stand, Tommy?” Tommy just snorted and rolled to his feet. He didn’t even stumble.

“Nope, I’m totally plastered, can’t you tell?” He teased, spinning around in a circle just to prove he was steady on his feet. “What do you need?”

“Come hang out with us outside for a few.”

“Why?”

“Now, Tom.” Schlatt snapped. Tommy bristled but followed Schlatt anyway, making their way through the house and out onto the front porch. “Sit.”

“Is this an intervention?” Tommy laughed, sitting down against the railing.

“No, it’s just me making sure you don’t end up fucking trashed.”

“I don’t think there’s enough alcohol here for that,” Tommy snorted. “It’s been a while, but my tolerance is still through the roof, dude. Liver of steel.”

“That’s not something to fuckin’ brag about, kid.”

“Who said I was bragging?” Tommy scoffed. “Who the fuck is proud of being able to drink grown men under the table before they’re old enough to vote?”

“You seem pretty fucking pleased with yourself.”

“Oh, no, I’m going to hate myself in the morning. I’m completely pissed at myself now.”

“Then why the fuck did you *do it?*”

“Ehh, I mean. I was doing it originally just to get Jared to shut the fuck up, but honestly, it was mostly just because I hated myself already and figured it couldn’t hurt.” Tommy shrugged, liquor in his veins making him brutally honest. “Figured I’d already fucked up enough by going and not telling Phil where I was, might as well give him something to actually be pissed about.”

“He doesn’t know you’re *here?*”

“You’re kidding, right? You really think Phil would have let me go to a party?”

“But Wilbur and Technoblade know, right?”

“Fuuuccck no,” Tommy snorted. “Wilbur would have lost his goddamn mind.”

“Jesus Christ, kid! What the hell is wrong with you? What if something happened and I was too drunk to do something?”

“I dunno. I’d get my shit rocked, I guess.” Tommy joked. “Nothing happened. I’m not even drunk.”

“I’m calling your brother. I’ll get Tubbo home tomorrow morning.”

“I already texted them. They’re on their way now,” Dream replied from where he was lounging on the steps. “Probably only a minute or two away.”

“*Dude,*” Tommy groaned. “They’re going to kick my ass.”



“Neither of them would hurt you,” Schlatt snapped.

“I didn’t mean it literally,” Tommy replied, raising an eyebrow. “Who do you think I am?”

“I- you’re an abused traumatized kid! How the fuck am I supposed to know?”

“Yeah, but it’s fucking Wil and Tech. They’d sooner slit their own throats than hurt me,” Tommy shrugged. “I’m fucked up, but I’m not stupid.”

“Wil says you still flinch when he goes to *hug* you sometimes.”

“Ehhh, that’s sober Tommy. Sober Tommy forgets how old he is sometimes. Drinking Tommy isn’t an idiot.”

“You forget how old you are?” Dream asked, sounding confused.

“Sometimes. I’ll get all caught up in getting my head and suddenly I’ll think I’m like 12 again and being locked in closets and getting the shit beat out of me for closing a door too loud,” Tommy shrugged. “S why I started drinking in the first place, back when I did it all the time. Feels more, I dunno, clear, when I’m drunk enough to forget how much it hurt.”

“Oh my god, you really did get fucked up in the system, didn’t you?” Schlatt asked.

“Obviously. When was the last time you met a 17-year-old who threatened to kick a drug dealer’s ass who didn’t have something wrong with them?”

“Dude, is this going to like, trigger something? Like when you sober up?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m gonna be a fuckin’ wreck for weeks,” Tommy shrugged. “Phil’s gonna wish he could send me back. Too bad the fucker’s too nice to do it.”

“Do you want to be sent back?”

“Oh god no. Still gonna suck when I leave ‘em though. Oh, that’s Techno’s car,” And it was, Techno pulled into the yard and he and Wilbur immediately got out, heading toward the house.

“What do you mean, leave them? You’re not going to like, kill yourself, right?” Schlatt croaked out.

“Oh, no, probably not. I just meant when I turn 18 and run away from all this and pretend like I’ll be totally fine on my own when really I’ll probably find a shit job and a shitty apartment and pretend like everything’s great if they ever manage to get back ahold of me. Hi, Techno.” Techno looked nervous, looking at Tommy like he might pass out or something.

“Hey, Theseus. How are you feeling?”

“Just fine, big man. Hi, Wil.” Tommy stood, stretching a bit and grinning at them. “You going to lecture me here or wait until we’re in the car?”

“Schlatt said you’d been drinking...” Wilbur said, confused.

“Yeah, I have.”

“You... don’t seem drunk.”

“I’m *slightly* buzzed,” Wilbur looked at Schlatt with a confused expression.

“He’s had like a fifth and a half worth of liquor, don’t let him fool you. Just because he looks normal does not mean he’s sober.”

“Come on, Toms. Let’s get in the car.”

“Sure. Bye, Schlatt. Bye Dream. Make sure Tubbo drinks water.”

“Yeah, we will, kid. Good luck.” Tommy flashed them a smile and started toward the car.

“I- thank you for watching him,” Techno said, looking at Dream and Schlatt.

“Yeah, of course, man. Look- he said this was going to fuck him up for a couple of weeks, I- will you-“

“We’ll keep an eye on him, and we’ll let you know what’s going on, yeah.”

“Thanks.”

When Techno swung into the driver’s seat, Tommy was already sprawled across the back seat casually, and Wilbur was all but staring at him.

“So... uh, what happened?”

“I went to a party with Tubbo, we drank, you came and picked me up,” Tommy snorted, fiddling with his seat belt.

“You don’t like alcohol,” Wilbur said with a frown.

“I don’t like it when I’m sober, when I’ve been drinking I like it just fine.”

“You seem pretty sober to me,” Techno argued.

“Oh, I’m not. Definitely not sober. Not like, drunk drunk or anything but I don’t think I’ve been sober for hours.”

“Tommy, what the hell were you thinking?” Wilbur snapped, and Tommy grinned at him.

“Aye, there it is! I was wondering when you’d actually get annoyed.”

“No, seriously! You didn’t even tell us you were going to a party, let alone that you were going to be drinking! What if something happened to you?”

“I mean I wasn’t planning on drinking, if that makes you feel better.”

“No, it doesn’t! Of all the reckless-“

“Wilbur. Relax,” Techno grimaced.

“No, I’m not going to *relax*! He could have gotten seriously hurt, and we would have had no fucking clue! I can’t believe *you* of all people are telling me to relax, how many times did you give me this exact same fucking lecture?”

“Enough times to know it *doesn’t work*. ” Techno snapped.

“Woah- don’t get mad at each other, you’re supposed to be mad at me,” Tommy laughed.

“Do you... want us to be mad at you?” Techno asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not really, but I don’t want you to be mad at each other either. You’re like, brothers, y’know? Supposed to like each other and all.”

“We aren’t going to stop liking each other because we get into a small fight, Toms,” Wilbur sighed. Techno started the car.

“Not at first, no. But you’ll start to resent each other just a little and then one of you will move out and you’ll promise to keep in contact, and you will for a while but then talking every day becomes once a week, and then suddenly you only see each other on holidays, and then you’re like total strangers who have to reintroduce yourselves every time you see each other.”

“I think I like sober Tommy more than I like drunk Tommy,” Techno grunted. “You’re kind of a dick when you’re drinking.”

“You’d be the only one who prefers me sober,” Tommy snorted. “Least I wasn’t drinking straight bourbon or something. Whiskey makes me *mean*. ”

“I’m pretty sure everyone prefers sober Tommy. You’re kind of weird like this.”

“What, happy? You prefer me when I’m drowning in self-loathing, Tech? Don’t worry, you’ll probably be seeing a lot of that in the next few days.”

“What do you mean?” Wil asked, turning around to look at Tommy.

“I mean, you know how you felt all snappy and keyed up when you were hungover? Mine isn’t like that, I just get fucking *miserable*. And it lasts ages, I remember I went on a real bender before I left my home a few years back and I went through like two more houses before I started feeling like a person again.”

“Why did you *drink* then? If you know how you get after?”

“Why do *you* drink?”

“We aren’t talking about me, I’m an adult.”

“Yeah but it’s the same answer, innit? Because while you’re drunk you forget whatever you had to be sad about originally. ‘S nice, to be able to let it take the back burner sometimes, y’know?”

“That’s... not a healthy mindset, Toms.”

“Imagine having a healthy mindset. Couldn’t be me.”

“Ugh- whatever. We’re home. Be quiet when you get in there so we don’t wake Dad up.”

“What, you’re not going to tell him?” They all got out of the car.

“Do you want us to?”

“Yeah, probably. I’ll tell you not to in the morning, but he probably deserves to know.” They opened the door and Phil was there, looking unimpressed.

“Deserves to know what?” Phil asked, fixing them all with a glare. “Deserves to know why my two adult sons are sneaking back home at 4 am with my teenage son who is supposed to be at his friend’s house for the night?”

“Don’t be mad at them,” Tommy cut in, seeing Techno open his mouth to reply. “They came to get me so I didn’t do anything stupider than what I already did.” Phil raised an eyebrow at that.

“And what did you do?”

“I went to a party, had a few drinks. It was stupid. They came to get me because Dream texted them. They didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You did *what*? ”

“Dad, wait-“ Wilbur tried to cut in.

“Wilbur, Techno, go to bed. We’ll talk later.” They both looked like they were going to protest, but Tommy and Phil shot them identical warning looks and they both left towards their rooms. “You went to a party?”

“Yeah, at Big Q’s place. Wasn’t planning on drinking or anything, but it happened anyway,” Tommy shrugged.

“What the *hell* were you thinking?” Phil’s voice rose a little. Tommy snorted.

“Wilbur gets his dad voice from you.”

“Shut,” Phil took a deep breath like he was trying to calm down. “Tommy, I get that you’re a teenager and you want to hang out with your friends, but there are much safer activities besides getting drunk at a near-perfect stranger’s house! Jesus Christ, kid, you could have gotten hurt, or drugged, or some shit! What the hell would we have done?”

“Probably footed the hospital fees and then got yelled at by George, if I had to guess.”

“This isn’t fucking funny!”

“I- no, it’s not. I’m sorry, Dad. I should have told you the truth about where I was going. I shouldn’t have gone in the first place, really, but you know me, always been an act first, think second kind of person-“ Tommy froze, looking at Phil in bewilderment. “Are you... crying? Jesus, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you so much, I won’t go again, okay? I promise, just-“ Phil wrapped Tommy in a hug, which probably would have spooked the shit out of him if he was thinking clearly. “Uh... you good, big man?”

“You’re so fucking grounded it’s not even funny, brat,” Phil choked out, squeezing Tommy a little tighter before pulling away and giving him a watery smile. “I love you, kiddo.”

“I- yeah, I love you too? What the hell just happened?”

“Nothing, nothing. Do you need food? Water?”

“Water. Some ibuprofen, too, if we have any. Don’t want to be more miserable than I’m already going to be in the morning.”

“I’ll bring it up to your room in a second. Go ahead up.”

“Oh... Kay? You’re sure you’re good?”

“Yes, I’m okay. Shoo, gremlin child.” Tommy grinned sheepishly.

“Okay.”

When Phil brought him a bottle of water and the pills a few minutes later, Tommy was changed and sitting on his bed. Phil handed them to him and ruffled his hair a bit. Tommy



laughed a little and told him goodnight, but Phil was already out the door, fighting to keep the smile from his face. As annoyed as he was at being lied to, the only thought he really had was,

*'He called me Dad.'*

# Chapter 27

## Chapter Summary

The family braces for the worst

## Chapter Notes

Tw for suicidal thoughts that carries on for the next several chapters

Recap of the last chapter:

Tommy went to a party, and ended up drinking. Because he has a past with drinking, he's concerned it's going to trigger a major depressive episode. He calls Phil Dad during the lecture. Phil cried because he is a sap.

ALSO: This isn't gonna be done by tomorrow as I'd hoped. (May 29th is my partner's birthday, if y'all wanna drop them some well wishes in the comments!!) This fic has really gotten away from me lol. We are coming up on the end, kind of, but I want to write more in this universe so feel free to start requesting situations you'd like to see them in!

“Dad? You’re smiling at your coffee. You didn’t actually snap and murder Tommy, right?”  
Techno asked from the doorway with a grin.

“Your brother is a little shit, you know that? Also, I’m mad at you.”

“Yeah, yeah he is. So why are you smiling like that?”

“He called me Dad. And he wasn’t even doing it to get out of trouble like you bastards did when you were kids, I don’t even think he realized he said it.”

“Ooof, pulling out the big guns. That’s a big L.”

“Shut. I’m mad at you. You’re grounded.”

“Bruh. I’m a grown man.”

“Did you just ‘*bruh*’ me?!” Phil squawked, laughing.

“Yup,” Techno replied, popping the ‘p’. “Sure did. Wil still asleep?”

“No, he’s just pretending to be so he didn’t have to talk to me first.”

“Coward.”

“I can *hear* you!” Wilbur screeched.

“Stop yelling, you’re gonna wake the baby up!”

“I’m not a baby, fuck you,” Tommy groaned from behind Wilbur. “Good morning, afternoon, whatever. Do we have coffee?”

“Aw, is the little bitty baby hungover?” Wilbur teased, ruffling Tommy’s hair. Tommy promptly batted his hand away and flipped him off.

“No, the itty bitty baby is 6’2 and tired as shit,” Tommy groaned. “And his irritating ass brother is blocking the caffeine.” Wilbur just laughed and moved to block the doorway more. “Are either of you particularly attached to him?” Techno and Phil glanced at each other and shrugged, mostly curious to see where this was going. Tommy grinned wickedly and promptly *picked Wilbur up*. He spun them around so Tommy was now in the doorway, and unceremoniously dropped Wilbur, who stumbled and just barely avoided landing on his ass.

He was looking completely shocked, and incredibly amused. Tommy didn't even spare him a glance as he made his way to the kitchen.

"Dude you just got manhandled by a toddler," Techno whistled. "F's in the chat for Wil's dignity."

"I'm pretty sure I'm not a toddler," Tommy called from the kitchen. He came back into the kitchen with a mug of coffee and a flat expression. "Wilbur, close your mouth, you'll catch flies."

"You just *picked me up!*"

"You weigh like 100 pounds."

"Aren't you like, chronically in pain or something? That should make you weaker."

"It did make me weaker. But I can still like your scrawny ass up," he took a sip of his coffee and sat down at the table. "Ugh, I feel like trash."

"Drinking does that to you," Phil replied with an eye roll.

"Yeah, I'm well aware, thanks. Oh, by the way, I know I'm grounded or whatever but I need to text Tubbo and make sure he's alive before you take my phone."

"I'm not going to take your phone, you need to be able to get in contact with people," Phil said with a confused expression.

"Oh. Uh- so what does grounding entail then? Please don't make me sleep in the closet, I will bite you," Tommy teased, but his expression did look kind of wary.

“Bite me? What? Actually never mind- Just no hanging out with your friends after school for the week. Unless otherwise approved.”

“Wait, what? Dad, I don’t think you know how grounding works,” Tommy snorted, and then Phil was crying again. “Oh my fucking god, is that why you were crying last night? You’ve actually got to be kidding.” Techno howled.

“You got him *twice* in twenty-four hours! This is hilarious.”

“Why the hell are you crying? Can’t exactly keep calling you ‘Old Man’ forever, can I?” Tommy briefly wondered if he was still drunk, because he did not seem to have any sort of filter at the moment. The thought was drowned out by Phil laughing.

“All three of you called me Dad for the first time after doing something that should have gotten you grounded. I’m starting to think this is a personal attack.”

“It is, we’re just too cute to stay mad at,” Wilbur teased. Tommy just huffed out a laugh and went back to drinking his coffee. He could feel the way his mind was fighting the urge to snap, could feel the pinpricks of exhaustion dragging him down, but he shoved them aside and forced himself to breathe normally and not get worked up. And then, as if reading his mind, Techno spoke up.

“So... how are you feeling, Theseus? Other than hungover, I mean.”

“I’m still feeling okay. I think it’s starting to set in, but I must still have some alcohol left in my system because it’s not too bad yet,” Tommy replied, keeping his eyes trained on his cup. “I *can* feel it, though.”

“Wait, what are we talking about? I feel like I missed a conversation,” Phil asked, looking concerned.

“I-” Tommy choked out, then promptly shut his mouth.

“Toms said drinking can trigger depressive episodes for him, and that they get pretty bad,” Wilbur explained. “He told us last night when we first picked him up.” Tommy just nodded sharply and kept glaring at his coffee.

“Well, okay. What should we do to help? What sort of things should we be looking for? Also, I’m a little concerned about your apparent wealth of knowledge in how drinking affects you, since you’re, you know, a teenager.”

“I used to drink... a lot. I haven’t in a while, and I should not have picked it back up. I- it would be good to not have any alcohol in the house, including the cooking wines? Probably? I get kind of pissy when I’m in a funk, so I might be a little distant or weird, I’m not really sure. I never really used to deal with them much, I just stayed drunk so I wouldn’t have to,” Tommy sighed. “Not yet, but if it gets bad I might want to see Puffy once a week instead of once every two, I-” Tommy cut himself off and took a deep breath. “It’s going to be ugly, I’m sure. If you want to temporarily cart me off somewhere so I don’t trigger anything I don’t blame you. Might not be a terrible idea.”

“I... okay. We’ll unpack the drinking a lot thing in a bit. How long... will this last? Do you know?”

“It used to be a while, I think the longest was a month, it really really fucks me up, more than I think it’s really supposed to? But it can be anywhere from a few days to a few weeks easily. Fuck, I really fucked myself over with this shit, what the hell was I thinking?” Tommy groaned, feeling tears prick at his eyes. “I’m really sorry.”

“We all make mistakes, kiddo. We’ll be here to help you through it. Do... do we need to get in contact with an addiction center?”

“No, no. As long as I don’t have direct access I won’t go out of my way to get any, I trust myself to not go looking for it. I just- I don’t know. I really fucking hate myself right now.” Tommy’s voice broke, and then the tears were falling, streaming down his face and hitting the table. Phil swallowed and glanced at his other sons, who looked just as heartbroken and lost as he did.

“Okay, bud, it’s going to be alright. We’re gonna be here for you through this, okay? Is there anything else you’re going to need? Anything we should watch for?”

“I- maybe... maybe restrict access to the medicine cabinet. Just for now. It doesn’t always get that bad, but...” Tommy trailed off, trembling violently. Wilbur and Techno looked pale at that, and Phil looked to be a little nauseous.

“I- does that mean what I think it means?” Techno asked, looking rapidly between everyone else in the room. Nobody answered. “Oh, god.” He murmured, and promptly left the room, slamming his own door when he made it there. Tommy flinched at the loud noise and somehow managed to look even more miserable.

“He’s not mad at you, Toms. I promise. I’m... gonna go check on him, okay? I’ll be back,” Wilbur said quietly, and quickly left the room too.

“Okay, I... we’ll make sure you don’t have access to anything you can hurt yourself with, if need be. But if those... thoughts start appearing, I need you to come to me, okay? Can you do that?”

“I can try, I don’t know if- I’m not sure how much I’ll care later,” Tommy admitted. “I, can I go back to sleep? I need to lie down.”

“Sure, bud. We can talk more later, okay?”

“Right.”

—

Phil made his way slowly to Technoblade’s room. He could hear his oldest sons speaking in hushed but angry tones, and he winced before knocking gently. He heard Techno’s muffled ‘come in’ and opened the door, unsurprised to see both Wil and Tech with red blotchy faces and eyes rimmed pink.

“Hey, boys. How are you two doing?”

“Don’t- don’t pretend like you’re fine,” Techno snapped, gesturing toward the empty chair, which Phil moved to and sat down in. “We aren’t kids, we know you’re just as upset about this as we are.”

“Yes, I am, but I am the parent, and my priority is making sure you three are okay first.”

“Don’t spew some Margaret garbage, she wasn’t right then and she isn’t now. Just, be upset with us,” Techno snapped, tangling his fingers back into his hair.

“Where’s Tommy?” Wilbur asked from his spot on the floor.

“He went back to sleep, he said he needed to lay down.”

“What’s the game plan?” Tech asked, looking toward the others with a grimace. They both looked a little unsure, so he just nodded. “I’ll dump out the wine. Dad, I guess you can go get the pills from the medicine cabinets, Wil, can you make sure there aren’t sharp objects anywhere he could get them? I- Jesus I have no idea how to handle this. Should we nail the windows shut?”

“Techno, breathe. Tommy’s going to be okay, let’s just start with the wine, pills, and sharp objects. If it comes to it we’ll move him into the office down here- no window and you’ll be able to hear if he leaves- but we don’t need to go to those extremes yet. We don’t know how it’s going to affect him, he could just be a bit snappy like Wil gets. We’ll make sure to have his friends keep an eye on him at school, and half the town loves the kid, nobody is going to let anything happen.”

“I just- yeah, okay,” Techno sighed, standing up. The others did as well, splitting off to take care of their respective tasks. Techno went through the kitchen, taking the two bottles of opened wine and pouring them down the sink and taking the un-opened ones and boxing them up to keep in his room until things had settled down. He passed Phil who had a bag with



every pill bottle in the house in it and gave him a grimace. Phil just jerked his head towards his bedroom, indicating that that's where they would be. Techno nodded. Wilbur had already finished gathering up anything he was worried about being potentially dangerous and was setting the box down next to Techno's closet.

"He's in my room more than yours, I figured it'd be best to keep them here," he explained. Techno just nodded and set the two boxes in the back of his closet and covered them with a pillow and another box, just to make them blend in a bit. Wil left, and Techno sat back down on his bed, groaning. He pulled out his phone, seeing a few missed calls and texts. He clicked on Dream's contact and it rang twice before he picked up.

*"Blade? Are you okay? How's Tommy?"*

"He's asleep right now. Can you come over?"

*"On my way. Fifteen minutes."*

"Thanks." Techno hung up, laying back and dialing Schlatt.

*"This is Schlatt."*

"It's Technoblade."

*"Oh! Hey, how's the kid?"*

"Do me a favor, if he asks to buy- anything, booze, drugs, whatever, let us know."

*"I wouldn't sell him anything dangerous, you know that. And I definitely wouldn't sell him alcohol."*

“J, it’s really important. Even cigarettes, anything, you need to let us know.”

*“Oh, fuck, it’s bad, isn’t it? I won’t sell to him. I’ll try to get in touch with a few contacts and make sure they know too.”*

“Yeah, it’s bad. Please do. Thank you.”

*“Fuck, god fucking dammit, I knew I should have called as soon as he walked in, I didn’t know you guys didn’t know he was there. Let me know if there’s anything else you need, okay? Might pick up Wil tonight and see how he’s doing.”*

“Don’t let Wil drink either.”

*“No, I won’t, don’t worry. We won’t go to my place. Keep me updated, I guess.”*

“Yeah, I will.” The line went dead. He shot off a few texts, to pretty much anyone who knew Tommy, asking them to let them know if they saw Tommy out and about for the next few weeks. Most of the replies were positive. Some were confused, but he just told them it was important and they conceded quickly. He was suddenly very grateful to live in a small town. At least people looked out for each other.

# Chapter 28

## Chapter Summary

The aftermaths of mistakes

## Chapter Notes

Content warning for discussions of potential self-harm (Nothing happens, it's just talked about)

This chapter is set up a smidge differently, just because it swaps POV pretty often! We'll be back to typical fashion next chapter. It's also a bit short. My b

Dream arrives in typical fashion, by suddenly appearing and demanding attention. Techno huffed and let him into his room, immediately collapsing into the ever-growing pile of pillows and blankets on his bed. Dream climbed into the bed not a second later, carefully positioned to give Techno plenty of room while still being close enough to initiate contact. It was a practiced movement, developed for years since they were children and never having needed adjustment. Even if they were not as close as they had once been, it had become second nature to the pair.

“Do you want to talk about it or do you just want to be mad in silence?” Dream asked softly, watching Technoblade’s careful movement as he ran a hand through his hair and fiddled with his glasses. He just hummed a little. “Oh, you aren’t mad, are you?”

“No. He thinks it’s going to be bad, the depressive episode. He asked us to hide the pills.” Dream frowned at that, pulling his mask off and tucking it in his pocket so Techno could read his expressions. “I’m not sure what to do.”

“I mean, all you can do is be there, right?”

“What if it isn’t enough?”

“It will be, Blade. You’re a good older brother.”

“I hope so.”

—

“Wilbur! Get your ass down here, we’re causing chaos!” Schlatt yelled from the doorway. He heard the door open and laughed at Wil’s annoyed expression. Wilbur flipped him off, but came down anyway, slipping into his boots and following the other out and to the car. “Were you asleep? Why do you look like you got ran over?”

“I spent the morning crying and debating whether or not the hair scissors in the bathroom were sharp enough to hurt yourself with,” Wilbur replied flatly.

“Fuck- do you need me to-“

“Not for me. I’m okay.”

“For *Tommy*?” Schlatt hissed, going around a turn just slightly too fast.

“Yeah. I don’t want to talk about it. What are we doing?”

“We’re going to the cliffs to scream into the void. Maybe get some coffee.” Schlatt said, glancing over at Wil. “Have you already had your breakdown or should I pull over so I can make sure you can breathe?”

“Not yet. I’m feeling a little numb right now, I think you’re okay to just drive. I’ll let you know.”

“Coffee first?”

“Please. I think the caffeine will let my brain feel emotions again.”

—

Phil was sitting on the back porch, head in his hands. He was kind of watching the crow who was flitting from tree to tree, but mostly he was just trying to get a handle on himself. He felt so out of his depth. Even when he took in Wilbur, all spitfire and manic episodes followed by horrendous crashes he felt better equipped. When Techno came home bruised and angry, he could soothe him with bandages and calm nights. When Wilbur came home drunk and angry at the world, he could bring him back to earth. But with Tommy, he felt as though he was sailing through uncharted territories, and finding himself going in circles. A traitorous voice whispered ‘ *you can’t handle this* ’ and he groaned. He wondered if it were true. Perhaps this *was* beyond what Phil could deal with. Maybe the child was simply his Achilles heel, but he knew he’d sooner die than send him away. Tommy was his son, his youngest and newest son, but no less loved. He wished for not the first time that he had someone to help him raise his children. Wondered if perhaps wearing his heart on his sleeve was his penance for his mistakes in the past.

But those things didn’t matter, now. What mattered was making sure his children would be okay, and anything else could wait.

---

Tommy woke, and two things were glaringly obvious. One; despite not really being tired, he did not want to leave his bed. And Two; the house was completely silent. No music, no talking, nobody walking across creaking floorboards.

His mind supplied the helpful suggestion of ‘ *they left you, you’re too much* ’ and Tommy pushed it away, trying to remind himself that it wasn’t true, that they loved him, but even

now, the words were tinged in doubt. He pulled himself from the bed and made it to the shower, but found once in the scalding water that he didn't have the energy to stand. He sat on the floor of the shower, crying quietly until the water ran to ice. Still, the house was quiet when he left. He forced himself downstairs, hair wet and dripping and his whole body shaking from the cool air. Wilbur's door hung half-open, and he was not inside. Techno's door was closed, but there was a note taped to it.

'Out with Dream. Be back later. Wil's with Schlatt. -T'

Tommy choked back a sob. Phil was not in his office. His cellphone was sitting on the table. Tommy stared at it for what must have been ten minutes before taking a deep breath and going to the kitchen. No leftovers from lunch in the fridge. He didn't feel like cooking, so he opted for a glass of water before going back to his room. He sat on the floor instead of his bed, texting Tubbo to make sure he was okay. When Tubbo replied, a simple '*not dead yet!*' He huffed out a laugh and sat his phone down. He thought about working on homework, or maybe just watching some videos on his phone, but instead, he just pulled up his Spotify and let the sounds of whatever sad band Wilbur had found this week play. He wasn't really listening to the words, just hoping to drown out the quiet.

---

Techno hit the punching bag as if it personally had caused all his problems. Dream was mostly watching, occasionally making a quip about his poor form. Techno only glared in reply, hitting it harder.

---

Wilbur let his feet dangle over the cliff's edge, watching the waves crash against the shore. Schlatt was rubbing his back, making occasional comments to remind Wil that he did, in fact, need to breathe. Wilbur let his tears fall, gasping for breaths when reminded and not speaking much.

---

Phil watched the damn crow, who seemed to be watching him right back. He wondered if corvids were really as smart as they seemed. Maybe they were smarter.

---

Tommy pulled at his hair, just barely holding back his urge to scream. He tapped his feet and walked himself through his breathing exercises over and over. They weren't helping as much as he wished they would.

---

Techno cried in Dream's car.

---

Wilbur cried on Schlatt's shoulder.

---

Phil cried into his hands.

---

Tommy had stopped crying, and he let the numbness settle into his bones as if it were a comforting weight and not an oppressive reminder of his mistakes.

---

Wilbur got home first. The house felt cold, but he could hear music playing loudly from upstairs, so he waved goodbye to Schlatt and followed the sound. Tommy's door was closed, so he knocked lightly. When Tommy opened it, he gave Wil a small smile that didn't reach his eyes and gestured that he could come in before collapsing back onto the floor.

"How are you feeling, Toms?"

"Fine. I'm a little tired still," Tommy replied with a shrug. Wilbur winced at the lie, but didn't push.

"Do you want to go back to sleep?"

"No." Tommy wasn't really looking at him, mostly just staring off into space.

"Are you dissociating?"

"Nope. Just tired. Been a long day, I think."

"It has. Do you want to talk about it?" Wilbur grit his teeth at the way Tommy just shook his head. Tommy's hair, usually curly and soft looking, somehow looked dull and matted, like he'd gotten it wet and not washed or dried it. Wilbur wanted to ask. But he couldn't think of a good way to bring it up. "That's okay. Do you want to talk about something else?"

"No, not really."

"Are you hungry? Have you eaten?"

"I'm okay, thanks." Wilbur wanted to cry again.



“Okay. I think Tech is going to cook when he gets back from the gym, we can eat then.”

“Sure.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk?”

“I’m fine.”

“I- you know I don’t believe that, right?”

“I don’t care. Techno and Dream just pulled in. You should go see them.” Wilbur sighed.

“Sure. I’ll see if they want to come up and hang out for a bit.”

“Whatever.”

Wilbur met them at the door and gave them a shaky smile. Dream huffed out a laugh.

“Oh, that good?”

“Yeah. Do you wanna sit up there with us? If Tommy minds he’s probably not going to say anything either way.” Dream shrugged and they all went upstairs. “Tommy? Can we come in?”

“Door’s open, innit?” They all came in, Techno and Dream sitting on the edge of Tommy’s bed while Wilbur took the beanbag. “Hi, Dream. Hi, Tech.”

“Hey, kid.”

“Hello.”

“How was the gym?”

“It was okay. Just burning off some steam, right, Blade?”

“Yeah, giving the equipment a real run for its money, y’know.”

“That’s fun. How are you feeling, Dream? Did you drink last night?”

“No, I didn’t. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” Techno snorted.

“Yeah, you sound really fine.” Tommy cracked a smile, still dull and lifeless, little more than a small tug at the corner of his mouth.

“I mean, what else do I say?”

“You could tell us the truth. We wouldn’t hold it against you,” Wilbur replied softly.

“I dunno. Don’t really have an answer. I feel tired.”

“Tired of what? Techno asked. Dream and Wilbur both shot him a warning look, but Tommy didn’t look too off-put.

“Right now? Breathing, mostly. Not that I’m going to do anything about it, don’t worry.” Wilbur winced, and Techno nodded.

“You’ll let us know if that changes, right?”

“I think you’ll be able to tell,” Tommy shrugged. “I’ll start turning blue or something.” It was a poor attempt at humor, but it still startled a laugh out of both Wilbur and Dream, and Techno cracked a small smile.

“Are you hungry?” Techno asked. “I can make something.”

“I’m not, no. Nobody made lunch, though, so Phil hasn’t eaten. Might want to make him something. I think he’s here somewhere.”

“You don’t know where he is?”

“Couldn’t find him inside when I woke up, his phone’s still here. Probably in the yard.”

“So... nobody was there with you when you woke up? You were alone?”

“Yeah,” Tommy agreed, shugging. “S fine. I just listened to some music.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, Toms,” Wilbur apologized, picking at his sleeve. “That must have been rough.”

“It was okay. I think I want to be alone again, if that’s alright.” Techno, Wilbur, and Dream exchanged looks and then nodded, the three of them standing.

“Sure, bud. We’ll be just downstairs, okay?”

“Yep. Thanks.” Once they left, Tommy shut the door behind them and fell into his bed. He didn’t have enough energy to do anything else.

# Chapter 29

## Chapter Summary

Oof.

## Chapter Notes

Tw for suicidal thoughts/ actions  
Spot the DSMP references

Phil eventually knocked on Tommy's door. He'd expected it, but he still felt a bit of frustration at the thought of having to have another conversation full of one-sided pity.

"Come in, Phil," Tommy groaned, sitting up. The door opened slowly, revealing Phil with a small smile.

"Hey, kiddo. How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Did you eat lunch?" Phil laughed a little at that.

"Don't worry about us right now, okay? Yes, I ate, but let us worry about your for a change."

"You always worry about me. You've been worrying about me since I showed up."

"Perks of being your family. We get to worry about you all we want." Phil sat down on the bed next to Tommy. He remembered how Margaret said he should ask directly, and wagered asking a second time, posing it more as a command. "Tell me how you're feeling."

“I... do you wish you hadn’t agreed to take me in?” It wasn’t an answer, but it did let Phil know where his head was, at the least.

“Never. Knowing everything that was going to happen, I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“Stupid choice, really. I... think I’m bad for people. I think I’m going to hurt you over and over again until I leave. Just keep breaking you all over and over again until there’s nothing left.” Tommy leaned on Phil’s shoulder. “I’m really sorry.”

“You aren’t breaking anything, kiddo. We’re here for you, and we’re happy you’re here.”

“I wish I wasn’t here. I wish I would have just been normal.” Phil wrapped an arm around Tommy’s shoulders.

“There is nothing wrong with you. You’re a product of how you were raised. You’ve done your best in a bad situation.”

“I think I’m poison. I feel like a plague, like I kill everything I touch. Hurt everything in arm’s reach.”

“You’re a kid. You are hurting, but you aren’t poison, and you aren’t poisoned. You’re a human being, and even with all of your flaws, you are *good* above all else, okay? You make us better, you bring out the good in people.”

“Nothing I’ve ever done supports that, but okay,” Tommy sighed. “I just... I don’t know. It’s going to get worse, and I don’t want to have to deal with it. I’m so tired, Dad. I’m already exhausted and I don’t think I have it in me to keep going.”

“We’ll keep you above water, Toms. We won’t let you fall, okay?”

“Thank you, for everything. This has been the best house I’ve ever been in.”

“Don’t say it like a goodbye. You aren’t going anywhere, okay? Let’s go get some food. You haven’t eaten in a while.”

“I’m really not hungry. I think it would taste like ash if I ate now.” Phil wanted to push, but he was holding back his own tears and didn’t want to charge the situation any more than it already was.

“You’ll eat dinner, right?”

“Maybe. I might just sleep.”

“Sleep now, I’ll wake you up for dinner and we can talk more, okay?” Phil squeezed his shoulders and let go. Tommy just nodded and laid down. “I love you, Tommy. We all love you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Phil went back downstairs. Techno and Wilbur were sat in the living room, watching a film. Dream had gone home. They looked up at him and both gave him small smiles. He returned them with his own fragile smile, and sat down in the armchair. They didn’t talk, though they knew they needed to, instead they just all pretended to watch the movie, stuck in their own thoughts.

Tommy didn’t come down for dinner. The next day, Monday, he did manage to eat breakfast, though he stayed home from school. Phil didn’t want to leave him alone, but he couldn’t miss work, and Wilbur and Techno both had classes on Mondays that couldn’t be skipped.

Tuesday, he went to school. It was just as bad as he was expecting.

“Tommy! How are you feeling? You look like shit still!” Tubbo teased, sitting down next to him. Ranboo sat on Tubbo’s other side, shooting Tommy a grin but not saying anything.

“Thanks, Tubs. Just what everyone wants to hear,” Tommy deadpanned. “You really are the sweetest.”

“I know! I’m great! What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just tired. Been sleeping like shit,” Tommy lied. Tubbo just shrugged and nodded.

“You can nap at lunch maybe. Maybe you’ll be less snippy.”

“I’m going to the library for lunch. I wanted to check out some books Tech mentioned.” A lie. He just didn’t want to have to deal with people.

“Want us to come with?” Ranboo asked, eyeing him closely.

“No. I’m good, thanks.” They both accepted that, and Tommy turned to focus on the teacher who was beginning the lesson.

Or at least, he tried to focus. His mind was mostly just wandering, stuck between reminding him that his body was aching from the hard plastic chairs and his thoughts telling him he was already managing to push away his two closest friends. He nearly rolled his eyes. One missed lunch was not enough to drive away people who cared about him, right?

---



Therapy felt awkward and impersonal for the first time in a very long time. Tommy had gotten very good at just speaking about his feelings, even if he wasn't doing anything to change them. Margaret had made sure he was able to vocalize them, but it felt like any progress he had made had been shot back to before he met her.

"So, I know you increased your sessions because something happened, would you like to explain what it was?" Puffy asked, kindly.

"You know what it was."

"Yes, technically, but I still want you to tell me your side if you can."

"I drank, now I feel like shit. It's not super complicated."

"Well, why were you drinking?"

"It was a party. I wasn't wallowing in my misery alone or some shit."

"But you know that alcohol is a trigger for you, so why did you decide to drink?"

"I just wanted to. Who cares?"

"Tommy..."

"I'm tired of this. Can we talk about something else?"

They didn't speak of much. Tommy gave snappy answers and ignored her questions for the entire two hours, and when he got in Techno's car afterward, he could only feel mad.

“How was therapy, Theseus?” Techno asked softly, giving the younger a small smile.

“It was therapy. It sucked.”

“I’ll make you your favorite for dinner, if that’ll make you feel better. We should have everything at home.”

“I’m not really hungry. Ate too much at lunch I think,” Tommy lied. Food tasted like soggy cardboard and it was too much of a chore to eat. Tommy was too *tired* to eat.

“Well, okay. Maybe tomorrow then?”

“I don’t care. Do what you want.”

“Tommy, you’ve got to eat. I know you’re feeling bad right now but-”

“Fuck *off*, Technoblade. You don’t know anything about me!”

“I- okay,” Techno mumbled, his shoulders slumping a little and his eyes focusing back on the road.

When they got home, Wilbur's bedroom door was open and he was clearly working on a new song. He brightened when Tommy passed. “Hey, Toms! Want to hear what I’m working on? It’s new.”

“No, not really. Goodnight.” Tommy missed the way Wilbur’s face fell, already in his own room with the door firmly closed and locked. He collapsed into bed without bothering with his schoolwork and let himself sleep.

---

Tommy briefly wondered how quickly he would push everyone away. Apparently, for his friends, it took less than a week. He sat with them, Tubbo, Ranboo, and Purpled chatting with each other around the lunch table, but they weren't even attempting to include him in the conversation anymore.

His family was still trying, bless them, but even a blind man could see the way their smiles were becoming more and more strained. Tommy relished in the feeling of pushing them away, just a little. Loneliness was easier than actually dealing with himself, or with them.

"What do you think, Tommy?" Tubbo asked him with a mischievous grin.

"If it's making you make that face, then I probably disagree with it."

"No fun!" Tubbo pouted. Tommy just shrugged and got up to leave. "Wait, lunch isn't over! Where are you going?"

"Anywhere but here. See you in English." Tommy shrugged.

"You didn't even eat!" Ranboo protested. Purple nodded his agreement.

"I'm not hungry. Bye."

Tommy ended up in the library, in the back corner that nobody ever checked. He stayed there through all of his afternoon classes, and texted Wilbur to let him know he was walking home. He wasn't grounded anymore, so he figured he may as well use the new freedom to get some fresh air.

*'You sure? I can pick you up, it's no problem.'*

*'yea. see u at home.'*

Tommy took the long way home, crossing through the main street but not stopping by anyone's shops to say hello. He waved at Niki, as she was outside, but pretended to not hear her call out to him before he turned the corner. The new house was much closer to the school, it was really only a twenty-minute walk at most, but he dragged it out, wandering a bit before finding himself on the bridge in the middle of town. He stared at the water just a second too long before shaking himself and continuing back to the house.

Phil wasn't home yet, but both Wilbur and Techno were in the living room when he passed, working on their own homework. Tommy nodded at them when he passed, but didn't stop for conversation. Neither of them tried to stop him.

---

"I don't know what to do about him. He's so closed off, it's like living with a stranger," Wilbur groaned after he knew Tommy was out of earshot.

"It's weird. Even when he first moved in he wasn't like this," Techno agreed. "He's kind of a dick right now. I know it's not his fault, but-"

"Yeah, I get it. Dad said to give him some space, but doesn't it kind of feel like it's making things worse? Like the more space we give him the more he takes. He feels like he's a million miles away."

"Yeah. Maybe Dad'll talk to him when he gets home."

---

“Toms, wake up, we need to talk.”

“Fuck off, Phil. I’m trying to sleep. It’s the weekend.”

“It’s not Phil and it’s also 2 pm.” Tommy glanced up to see Wilbur at his bedside, anxiously wringing his hands. “You’ve been up here for like, 20 hours. At least come eat.” Tommy figured he could probably do with some food, as little as he wanted it right now.

“Yeah, alright. Did Tech cook or do we need to call the fire department again?” Tommy sat up and stretched, wincing at the way his body protested. Spending so much time in bed made him stiff and achy.

“Techno made food.” Tommy nodded and followed Wil downstairs and into the dining room. Phil and Techno both looked a little surprised to see him, but there was a plate for him set out.

The meal was eaten in tense silence. Phil had tried a few times to start a conversation, asking them about classes or if they had plans for the weekend, but they’d all died once Tommy gave his answers, in the form of shrugs and clipped, one-word replies. Eventually, Techno got frustrated.

“Will you at least pretend to want to be around us? Christ.” The whole room stiffened for a second, then Tommy snorted.

“Sure.” He sat up straight, plastered a grin that was just a touch manic on his face, and ruffled his hair. “So in English class yesterday, that bitch teacher, you guys know the one, was trying to get Tubbo to read out loud, which obviously wouldn’t work since he’s fuckin’ *dyslexic*, which I said to her, but she told me it wasn’t an excuse! So obviously I got mad and told her *she* wasn’t-”

“I hate that so much more,” Techno groaned. “I hate how well you can act and I hate that I can see through it now because it’s like some uncanny valley shit.” Tommy shrugged and kept up the persona, mostly out of spite.

“You’re the one who wanted me to be normal, Techie! Now you get to deal with this! I saw a moth yesterday, she was the biggest man I’ve ever seen, she should be the president, I think. Wouldn’t a moth president be so *pog*? ”

“Shut the fuck up! Oh my god.” Tommy grit his teeth and slumped back in his seat.

“You’re the one who asked me to pretend to want to be here, I was just doing what you want.” It was eerie how quickly his mood shifted. “Beggars can’t be choosers and all that.”

“I just want you to stop acting like a corpse, Jesus! Why do you have to be such an ass about it?”

“Pft, wish I *was* a corpse,” Tommy mumbled. “I told you I was going to make you all hate me eventually, I don’t know why you’re surprised. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not a liar.”

“We don’t hate you!” Wilbur cried, looking frustrated. Techno snorted.

“Speak for yourself. I never signed up for this shit.”

“George is just a phone call away. I can have my shit packed by dinner,” Tommy shot back, glaring.

“You would do it too, wouldn’t you? Pack all your shit and just bail. Sounds about right.”

“Oh, fuck you, Technoblade. You’re just pissy because you’re getting shitty grades in your fucking stupid class and it’s got you all up your own ass.” Phil and Wilbur shot confused glances at Tommy, who glared, and then at Techno, who looked pale. “Oh, did you not tell them? I’m surprised they haven’t noticed, what with you being up till fucking 3 am every night working on homework that never seems to be done. What is it? Trying to study for the first time in your life and finally realizing you have no fucking idea how?”

“How do you even know that?! You’re always asleep!”

“Hard to sleep when *someone* is reading out loud in the middle of the fucking night, innit?”

“Wait- what are you two talking about? Techno?”

“I’m- I have a fucking C- in geography. Already. He’s being a dick about it.”

“You’re the fucking moron who’s too proud to ask for help about it! Wilbur literally knows every fucking country on the planet and you won’t let him help you fucking study! I swear the two of you have the combined intelligence of wet fucking sand.”

“Why do you even fucking care? You’ve made it obvious we’re not worth your fucking time!”

“When have I ever, in the seven months I’ve been here, ever not gone out of my fucking way to care about you dickheads? I literally *always* put your shit before mine, over and over and over, and it’s like you don’t even fucking acknowledge it! The second I need some time to myself and can’t play mediator between you dumbasses you act like I’m the fucking problem! And sure, I usually am the problem, but I can’t fix this shit if you treat me like a fucking pawn in some bullshit game that can be sacrificed at any turn! I’ve got my own shit going on, and somehow that makes *me* the bad guy? Fuck you! Fuck this stupid fucking family.” Tommy shoved away from the table and stormed upstairs, slamming his door so hard it rattled the windows, and fell to his knees and sobbed.

Twenty minutes later, Techno knocked on the door. Tommy had locked it, so when he tried the handle it didn’t turn. “Tommy, please, open the door. I’m sorry. I know I was being unfair, I was just stressed out- I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. Please-” Techno’s voice shook. “Just let me know you’re okay, at least.” The room was silent, which made sense since Tommy had long since left, window left open where he had climbed down the patio trellis. He hadn’t gone far, still in town, and he was pretty sure he intended on going back, he was just mad and didn’t want to be stuck in the house anymore. He wandered for a little while, and found himself at the beach, some odd six miles from home. He sat in the sand for a while, enjoying watching the waves roll in, before he dusted himself off and made his way up

to the cliffs. He sat watching as people played in the shallows, feeling his anger give way to numbness. He looked at the ocean and wondered how far the drop was. The hike up had taken him nearly an hour, it was easily going on 9 pm now, the sun just starting to dip below the horizon and painting everything orange. He heard a car pull up behind him, and three pairs of footsteps approach.

“T-Tommy?” That was Wilbur. His voice sounded a little far away, a bit echoey. “Toms, can you back away from the edge for us?”

“C’mon, Tommy. I know I call you Theseus but I don’t really want it to be a literal thing.” Someone, Dream by the sounds of it, hushed Techno.

“Tommy, *please* step away from the cliff,” Wilbur cried. Tommy faintly recognized that he was crying too.

“I think it would be easier to fall, rather than to be pushed. Wouldn’t you say so, Lycomedes? Less blood on anyone’s hands,” Tommy croaked out, turning back to look at Techno. He was right, it was Dream with them, no mask on for once. He had a pretty decently sized scar on his jaw, which Tommy assumed was what the mask was for. He must either be ashamed or embarrassed about it. Tommy wanted to know the story, but it felt inappropriate to ask, now.

“Tommy, please,” Techno cried, looking pained, but afraid to step any closer.

“I think I’ve overstayed my welcome.” Tommy looked back to the ocean.

“I- Tommy, whatever you’re thinking, it isn’t true. There’s so much left for you here. It’s not your time to die yet, Tommy.” Dream said, his voice shaking but firm. And that, Tommy thought, was the problem. He still had so much left to do, and no energy left to do it. That being said, he wasn’t going to make his brothers see him die, so he nodded and sighed.

“It’s never my time to die.” He took a step back from the ledge, and there was suddenly a firm grip on his wrist, and he was being spun around, and oh- Techno was hugging him. He could feel wet tears hitting his hair, could feel the way Techno shook, could hear both of their hearts pounding in their chests. He felt real, for the first time since the party. Not floating,



drunk, or drowning in self-hatred. He felt real, and loved, and safe. He let himself hug back, clinging tightly to the back of Techno's shirt as they knelt to the ground.

"Oh, god, Toms. I thought we were gonna- Oh my god. Oh my god." Techno mumbled into his hair. "I'm never fucking letting you go, Jesus Christ, You're okay- you're still here, oh my god." Tommy sniffled a little, burying his head in Techno's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," He muttered, trembling. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me I just--"

"You're safe, you're safe now. We'll figure everything else out later, okay? I'll protect you, even if it's from your own mind. I swear."

And Tommy believed him.

# Chapter 30

## Chapter Summary

Oof 2 Electric Boogaloo

## Chapter Notes

Tw for suicidal thoughts and actions and the discussion thereof

They had yet to make it to the *car* despite the fact they had all stopped having their combined breakdowns nearly an hour ago. This was - at least partially- because Techno was not kidding about not letting Tommy go. He still had an arm around his shoulders, and Tommy was still very much leaning against him. Wilbur had pulled him away briefly to squeeze the life out of him but was now sitting next to them, leaning heavily against Tommy. Dream had offered a few dozen times to clear out, but Techno had given him a *look* which apparently meant something to the two of them because he'd simply sat with them and stayed silent.

"Guys, I love you, but I am *so* tired, can we please go home?"

"Going home means telling Dad what happened," Techno reminded him. "We're kind of waiting to see if you're going to continue to freak out before we cross that bridge." And, well, it was a fair point, because Tommy was feeling very out-of-body right now.

"I want to sleep," He whined, tucking his head against his chest. "I want this shitty day to be over."

"Do you want us to call Phil here? I don't think moving around right now is a great idea. He doesn't know where we are yet. I'm not so sure any of us are okay to drive right this second."

“Sure. I don’t care.” Tommy glanced at his brothers then back at the cliffs. He wondered what would have happened if He’d just jumped- Techno pulled his head back around to look toward them again.

“Stop looking over there, please. You’re going to give me heart palpitations.”

“Sorry, sorry. I was just thinking...”

“A terrible habit for you, I’m finding.” Dream glared at Techno.

“Maybe now is not the time for affectionate bullying, Tech,” He snapped.

“I mean, It’s how I show my love,” Techno defended, grinning sheepishly. “Seriously, though, what were you thinking about?”

“I- it’s going to make you sad,” Tommy admitted.

“Tell us anyway. We can’t help if we don’t know what’s going on up there.”

“I just... I feel like things would have been easier if I’d just fallen, I guess. I don’t know.”

“They would *not* -“ Wil cried indignantly, but Techno cut him off.

“Easier how, Tommy?”

“I just- wouldn’t it be? You wouldn’t have to worry anymore.”

“Do you think mourning would be better than worrying?” Techno asked, his voice sounding a little choked. “I think I’d rather worry every day and go grey by 25 than have to attend your funeral.” Tommy shook his head.

“Mourning goes away, though. You have to worry about me the whole time I’m around.”

“We don’t *have* to worry about you, we *get* to worry about you. It’s a privilege, not an obligation,” Techno soothed. “And I don’t think we would ever stop mourning. Dad would probably figure out how to bring you back as a ghost or something.” Tommy snorted.

“I’ll just haunt you and tell you off for staining the carpet.”

“Phantommy comes with the house, don’t mind him scrubbing the floors at 3 am, he means no harm,” Wilbur teased.

“I mean a little bit of harm. If someone brings pink hair dye in the house I’ll probably explode the windows or something,” Tommy smiles a little, but it slips back into a look of contemplation. “I... don’t know, though. I just feel like I make things harder than they need to be.”

“You’re seventeen, you’re supposed to make things difficult. That’s your whole job,” Dream says with a grin. “Your purpose as a teenager is to make your dad and brothers feel old.” Tommy shrugs.

“Maybe normal seventeen-year-olds. I don’t think I count.” Wilbur and Techno both frowned at that.

“You can be a normal kid, Toms, none of us are going to hate you for that. You can leave your dishes in the sink and be loud and annoying all you want,” Wilbur said with a sad look in his eyes.

“I don’t... I don’t think I’ve ever been a kid. I feel like as far as I can remember I’ve always had to be *more* . And I don’t know if I have it in me to change now.”

“We have plenty of time to prove you wrong,” Wilbur promised.

“Your dad says he’s like two minutes away,” Dream said, looking at his phone.

“Thanks, Dream,” Techno said, giving him another look. Tommy wondered if they just spoke through telepathy or something because he really couldn’t discern a single thing from it but Dream just smiled back and moved closer.

“O’course.” They fell into silence, waiting until they heard the rumble of Phil’s SUV, which pulled up much closer to the ledge than Techno had. He got out of the vehicle the second the engine was cut, worried eyes locked on Tommy, and then he was there, sliding into a kneel and his hands were near Tommy’s face. He asked permission to close the gap, as he always did, and then his hands were gently turning his head back and forth like he was checking for injuries, or perhaps checking to make sure he was still there.

“Six hours. You were a ten-minute drive away and you waited *six hours* to tell me?” Phil half sobbed, half laughed, and Tommy could see where tears had been falling, his face was just as blotchy and red as the rest of theirs were. Tommy felt a pang at his chest for once again hurting his family.

“I’m sorry,” He muttered, looking at the ground.

“We can’t keep doing this, you’re going to give me a heart attack, kiddo.”

“Techno said the same thing,” Tommy replied without looking up. “I... I almost did something bad. I was going to do something bad.”

“Bad how?” Phil looked to the older three, who all looked heartbroken and uncomfortable.  
“Bad *how*?”

“Don’t be mad,” Tommy whimpered. “Please, don’t be mad.”

“I- I won’t be mad at you, I promise. Tell me what happened.” Tommy mumbled something under his breath. “Toms, *please* . Tell me what happened.”

“I was- I was going to- I wanted to-” Tommy started crying again, which almost shocked him, because he wasn’t super sure he had any tears left. “I-”

“Techno? Wil?” Phil asked, looking to them for the answer he wasn’t getting from his youngest. Wil was curled in on himself, and Techno just curled himself around Tommy again, rubbing circles in his back in an attempt to soothe him. “Someone tell me what happened.”

“Phil...” Dream started, but his voice broke as soon as he tried. He winced. “Let’s walk back over to the cars, okay?” Phil looked at the three of them, curled together, and nodded, following Dream. When they got to the car, Dream locked his hand around Phil’s wrist, presumably to keep him from running back over, and started talking. They were too far away to hear what exactly was being said, but they could all tell when Dream broke the news by the way Phil’s free hand shot to his mouth and he slumped against the car. Tommy tucked his head back into Techno’s chest and kept a firm grip on Wilbur’s hand, which had found its way into his at some point.

“Shh, it’s going to be alright, bud. It’s okay.” Wilbur whispered.

“He’s going to hate me,” Tommy cried. “I’m such a fuck up, why am I like this?”

“You’re not a fuck up, you’re an impulsive kid who’s been hurt too many times to count. Dad loves you, okay? He’s going to be upset, but not at you. I promise.” Techno said in a low, even tone. “We’re going to help you get better, okay? It’s never going to get to this point again.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can, because this is only happening again over my dead body, and can I let you in on a secret?” Techno grinned and stage-whispered conspiratorially, “Technoblade never dies.” Tommy snorted, pulling away so Techno could see him roll his eyes.

“Shut up.”

“Technoblade also never shuts up. It’s a character flaw.” Tommy giggled a bit, the first genuine laugh out of him in a while.

“Technoblade also speaks of himself in the third person, like a weirdo,” Wilbur quipped, nudging his brothers a bit.

“What’s the point of giving myself a cool name if I never get to use it? Hmm?”

Tommy looked over at Dream and Phil, who were still speaking. Dream had let go of him and was now shuffling awkwardly and speaking in a way that made it obvious that the conversation was a heavy one.

“Dad’s about to come over here,” Tommy observed. “What do I say to him?” Techno winced.

“I’m not sure, kid. Speak from the heart, I guess?” As predicted, Phil turned and started walking toward them. His steps were heavy and his face was so cold it looked nearly like stone. “Oh, Jesus. Wil, we might have to make a break for it, I’m pretty sure the old man’s gonna kick our asses.” Techno remarked. His voice was light, but Tommy could feel the way he tensed up. He remembered then that Techno had admitted to sometimes being scared of Phil. He wondered why, at the time, because while Phil was intimidating, getting to know him had made him much less scary to Tommy. He knew why now. Anyone would be scared of him if that look was directed at them. Phil stood only a few feet away from them, his shoulders back and jaw set, lips pressed together in a tight line. The only thing that gave him away was the tears that still clung to his eyes.

“Tommy, I need you to come here,” Phil said in a very even tone. Tommy clung tighter to Techno. “Tommy. Please just come here.” Techno gently let go of Tommy, giving him a small nod of encouragement. Tommy stood on shaky legs and made his way over to Phil. “I’m going to touch you now, okay?” Tommy nodded, and Phil pulled him into a hug so tight it nearly knocked the wind out of him. He wheezed a bit, tapping Phil’s arm. Phil held him for a second longer before letting go. “I love you. We’re going to talk more at home. Go get in my car.” Tommy just nodded briefly and headed toward the vehicle. Dream was still standing there, looking awkward.

“Hey, Tommy. How’d that... go?”

“I’m going to get in the car.”

“Yep, good plan. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

“We’ll talk soon,” Tommy repeated. His head was swimming a bit. He got into the front seat, buckling himself in and looking at his hands.

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“You two have thirty seconds to explain to me why I was not called immediately,” Phil said to his sons. His voice was still very even, but both of them could see the barely contained anger and hurt in his face.

“I- we- weren’t thinking super clearly,” Techno admitted.

“No, clearly not. I understand you two are very close with and protective of your brother, but I’m sure you understand how having to not only be contacted by, but told the situation by, someone other than one of you three is not exactly-“

“We didn’t know how to tell you. What- what the hell would we say? Oh, Dad, we found Tommy, he was trying to dive off a cliff! We got him back from the edge, though, wanna come bond?” Wilbur argued, his voice cracking several times throughout the sentence.



“We’re trying our best, here. It’s really unfair of you to be mad at us for something that happened to us just as much as it’s happening to you now.”

“I understand that the situation was difficult and precarious, but it was wholly irresponsible of you to not at the very least tell me that you had found him.”

“Sorry, we were just trying to cope with the fact that we were almost too late! Our bad! Next time we find out he’s trying to off himself we’ll be sure to give you a quick ring,” Wilbur hissed, now standing and glaring at his father with all the malice he could muster. “Just because you can do this shit doesn’t mean all of us can! What kind of bullshit is this? How the hell can you be *mad* at us for saving his fucking life? What the fuck did you want us to do, here? Should we just have pulled him from the edge and stuck him in the car and drove home? Waited until nobody could see us freak out like you do? Newsflash! Not everyone is so desensitized to seeing people almost die that they can act like everything is alright!”

“Wilbur-“

“No, he’s right, Dad,” Techno snapped. “We were doing our best with a very high-stress situation and now you’re pissed that we couldn’t do more. When exactly was the right time to call you? While he was still half off the cliff? After we held him while he cried? When he told us we’d be better off with him dead? *When* exactly should we have called you up? ‘Oh, give me a second Toms, I know you’re currently having a breakdown but I need to give Dad a quick ring so he knows you didn’t actually jump off a cliff, just almost did, hold that thought.’? Is that what we should have done? Oh, tell us, great and powerful father, what the correct course of action was! It’s not like either of us has a whole lot of fucking experience here!” Techno was standing now too, the two brothers glaring at him in a way that made all of the jokes about them being twins as teenagers ring true, because their looks were damn near identical, even without them looking anything alike. “We’re people too! We care about him just as much as you, it’s not like we were going to just leave him to his own devices thirty seconds after he almost died!” Phil looked up, blinking away tears before nodding, just once, and turning on his heel, and heading back toward the car. “And now you’re just walking away! Of fucking course you are. Heaven forbid you have to admit to being a callous asshole. God knows you can’t admit when you’re wrong.” Techno scoffed, grabbing Wilbur’s arm and storming past Phil, who had stopped at his son’s rant. He grabbed Dream as well, and the three of them made it to Techno’s car. Two doors slammed in unison while a third closed near silently and the engine started up, squealing tires and a cloud of dust left in the wake of where they once were. Phil took several deep breaths before making it back to his own vehicle, where Tommy was still sitting in the front seat.

“Hello,” Phil mumbled to him as he started the engine.

“Hi, Dad,” Tommy replied, his voice small and pathetic.

“Let’s go home, kiddo.”

“Okay.”

# Chapter 31

## Chapter Summary

Miscommunication my beloved

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the short ass chapter- the next one is gonna be much longer.

“Where are Techno and Wil?” Tommy asked once they made it home.

“They’ll be home later. We need to talk, okay?”

“Okay...” Tommy mumbled. Phil sighed, running his hands down his face.

“Tommy, I understand you’re feeling bad right now, but I really need you to listen, okay?” Phil waited for Tommy to nod. “I love you, and I want what’s best for you, but I can’t know what you need unless you tell me. I need you to tell me how you’re feeling and what’s going on in that head of yours. What can I do to help prevent this from happening again?”

“I- I don’t know,” Tommy admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“I- no, Tommy. I’m sorry. I don’t think I’m equipped to help you with this. If we can’t find a solution here, we may have to look into somewhere that will be able to help you better.”

“Y-you’re sending me away?” Phil winced.

“If that’s what you need. I- I don’t know what I’m supposed to do here, bud. You can’t seem to talk to us about these things, but we can’t keep going on like this. We’ll start by increasing your therapy, maybe we’ll try some medications, but If that doesn’t help...” Tommy was next to tears, and Phil looked wildly uncomfortable. Something spiteful in Tommy was *glad* . If Phil was just going to give up on him, Tommy hoped it felt terrible. He hoped Phil felt just as bad about it as Tommy did.

“Okay. Whatever you think is best, I guess,” Tommy agreed. He bit back his pleas to be forgiven. He knew once someone made up their mind it was too late to change it, but maybe if he started acting the part, acting like the proper, well-behaved teenager Phil wanted, he could make it to his eighteenth birthday. Tommy had always been a good actor. “Can.. can I go to my room?”

“Sure, Toms. I need to have a talk with Wilbur and Techno, but I’m sure once they’re home and we’ve spoken they’ll come up and see you.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Tommy left the room, leaving Phil alone with his thoughts.

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Phil sat in the living room for nearly two hours before Techno and Wilbur came home. They both still looked angry and were already halfway up the stairs when he called to them. “Boys, can you come back here first? We need to talk.”

“I think we said all we needed to say to you already, actually,” Wilbur snapped, but they did both come back into the room.

“Yes, I know. Listen, I- sit down, please. This is going to be a long conversation.” They both obliged, sitting next to each other on the sofa across from Phil. It sent a very clear message of Us versus you. “First off, I wanted to apologize. I let my emotions get the better of me, and I should not have. I expected from you something that was not only unfair, but downright cruel. I know you both did your best in a situation you were unprepared for. I was also unprepared, but I as your father should not have taken out my frustrations on you. I will work to do better. I’m sorry.” Techno and Wilbur deflated a bit, looking less defensive and more just generally upset. “You don’t need to forgive me now, or ever, if you so chose, for my actions, but I will work towards making it up to you, I promise.”

“Okay,” Techno nodded. Wilbur just shrugged. “Is there something else? You look a little sick. Is Tommy-”

“Tommy is in his bedroom. But that is what I wanted to talk to you about. I discussed with him a few additions to his current therapy, maybe trying medications or permanently increased visits, but we also very briefly discussed the possibility of in-patient therapy if those aren’t successful.”

“What, like a psych ward?” Wilbur asked, his eyebrows raised. “You think we should lock him up?” Phil sighed.

“Tommy has a lot of trauma, and it is *severely* impacting his life. We can’t just keep acting like applying love and affection will heal that. His experiences have left him very unstable, and while it would be a last resort option, yes, I think if all else fails, him staying in a long or short-term inpatient mental health facility could be a good idea for him. *But!* This is going to be a very sensitive topic, and we don’t want to relay any of our own biases on the situation, which is why I wanted to talk to you about it. I have no doubt Tommy will mention it to you, I need the two of you to *not* blatantly disagree with it, okay? I don’t want you talking about how much you don’t like the idea, I don’t want you showing your disdain for the places or anything like that. I know it seems extreme, but we really need to be careful here to not make it seem scarier than it already undoubtedly is for him. This is a lot to ask from you, especially after how I acted today, but I’m really going to need you on my side for this, because ultimately I know the two of you want what’s best for him.”

“Okay. Sure,” Wilbur begrudged.

“We’ll do our best,” Techno agreed.

“Thank you. Now, I don’t want to keep you from your brother too long, but I wanted to talk to the two of you about today. More in-depth.”

“Didn’t Dream-?” Techno started, but Phil held up a hand.

“I think you misunderstand. I don’t want to talk about *what* happened so much as I want to talk about *how* it affected you two. I’m sure it was a very scary situation, and I want to know what the two of you need, in order to cope.” Both of them sat in stunned silence for a moment.

“W-what?” Wilbur asked, glancing at Techno as if he would be able to confirm they heard Phil correctly.

“After the fire, we didn’t do this. I, foolishly, assumed the two of you would just work things out with your therapists and deal with it on your own, but I recognize now that that wasn’t the correct course of action. I am amending my behavior, starting with this. What do you need from me, to help deal with this situation? You were right, this wasn’t something that just happened to Tommy, it was something that happened to you two as well, and I did a poor job of understanding that.”

“I don’t... know? I guess I never thought about it?” Wilbur shrugged. “I think I’m going to do longer therapy sessions, so I might cut back my classes.”

“Me too. Cutting back my classes, I mean. Maybe more therapy,” Techno agreed.

“Good. Those are good ideas. I want you two to think about this more, okay? Let me know if there’s something I can do to help.”

“Could... could you be home more? Like, work from home or be home earlier a few days a week?” Wilbur asked meekly.

“Of course. I’ll talk to my boss about it first thing Monday,” Phil agreed easily.

“Maybe we could do things more together? All of us? Not the beach, though.” Techno winced.

“Yeah, I think the beach might be avoided for a bit. But yes, we can start doing things as a family more. Maybe we’ll set aside a day every other weekend? A movie night or something, take some trips, too. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah, Dad. That sounds good.”

“Okay. I- Okay. I love you two, alright? We’re going to figure this out.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

“Love you.” Phil gave them a soft smile.

“Alright, I’ve kept you down here long enough, go talk to him.” Both Wilbur and Techno shot out of their seats and up the stairs as soon as they were dismissed, and Phil huffed out a small laugh and made his way to the downstairs office to cry a bit in peace.

# Chapter 32

## Chapter Summary

Tommy maybe spirals a bit.

## Chapter Notes

This fic has officially hit 200 pages in my word doc, I'm going to scream. This was originally meant to be 50,000 words.

Wilbur knocked quietly on Tommy's door and was met with muffled words he couldn't quite understand but took as 'come in'. Tommy was face down on his bed, face stuffed into a pillow.

"Comfortable?" Techno drawled from behind Wil. Tommy just flipped him off, which made the older two laugh a little. They came in, shutting the door behind them, and took their usual spots in the room, Techno perched on the side of the bed and Wil in the beanbag chair on the floor. "How are you feeling?"

"I think I'm dissociating," Tommy groaned. "Or starting to. You missed out on the panic attacks already. I don't feel like a person."

"You are a person. You're real, this is really happening. Do you want to do a grounding exercise?"

"No, not really," Tommy huffed, sitting up. "Did you fight with Phil? You didn't come home right away."

"We got into a bit of a spat. Took Dream home, drove a bit. It's been settled now, he apologized and we'll forgive him," Techno explained.



“You *will* forgive him? You haven’t yet?”

“No. Dad’s an asshole,” Wilbur griped, rolling his eyes. “How... how are you doing? He said you had a pretty heavy conversation. It’s a lot to think about, I’m sure.”

“He wants to send me away,” Tommy admitted, and both of the older two grimaced.

“Yeah, he told us,” Wilbur thought to what Phil had said and carefully continued, “If it comes to that, which it might not, he’d be doing what he thinks is best for you, you know? He wouldn’t send you anywhere he didn’t think would help you.” Techno just nodded, a sour look on his face.

Tommy’s heart sank. He’d hoped his brothers would be on his side, but they both seemed to be, at least partially, accepting of the decision.

“I know. I just... I’d miss you. I’d miss this.”

“You aren’t going to lose us. No matter what, we’re going to be there for you, okay?” Wilbur promised.

“Right, right. Yeah.” Tommy thought of all the people in life that had promised to stick around. He could think of none that had stayed.

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The next few days seemed to pass in a blur for Tommy. A therapy appointment that went less than ideally, a psychiatry appointment that gave him three medications, and a day in school that went fine, but not great. He sat with Tubbo and Ranboo for lunch, picked very slowly at his meal, and tried to keep up with what they were talking about, but he was exhausted, and he had to reserve as much energy as possible for going home. Home, where Phil and Wilbur

and Techno watched him so closely he felt like he may as well be under a microscope. They knew him well enough to pick up on his more obvious tells, so he had to be incredibly careful to seem as normal as possible.

“What do you want for dinner?” Techno asked, passing Tommy where he was working on homework in the dining room. Phil had insisted on Tommy working in a public space on homework. Tommy wondered if he had spoken to Margaret again, as that was one of her rules as well when Tommy was feeling bad.

“Uh- pasta, maybe? I don’t know,” Tommy shrugged. Everything tasted like unseasoned flour to him anyway, but he didn’t want to say that.

“Sounds good to me. What’re you working on?”

“Uhh, English. Just a study guide, nothing big.”

“D’ya need help?”

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks.” Techno nodded and left to cook. Tommy went back to working for a few, the sounds of Wilbur’s playing only being interrupted by Phil’s occasional louder than usual voice filtering through. It felt very normal, very domestic, but to Tommy, it felt like watching a family move on without him again. He tried to focus on his work, but as simple as the assignment was, he felt like he was trying to decipher a language long lost to time.

He wasn’t sure how long he stared at it, but then Techno was there, telling him to put it away and get the others for dinner. Tommy barely felt himself agree, and then he was upstairs, telling them food was ready with a fake, painful smile and a voice that was just a tad too loud. Neither of them seemed to notice, smiling at him and heading downstairs. Phil ruffled his hair as he passed and Tommy felt acid burn his throat. They ate like they always did, chatting and teasing and acting like everything was fine. Tommy thought to tell Techno the food was good, and Techno smiled, so Tommy guessed it didn’t sound like the lie it was.

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It went like that for weeks. Tommy could tell the medicine was starting to affect him, but he wasn't sure it was a good thing. He'd noticed his ears had started ringing, and the anxiety meds made his shaking fade to barely noticeable, but now his head felt fuzzy constantly, like he was only ever half there. Phil commented that Tommy seemed happier, calmer, and Tommy told him he was feeling better than he had for a while, even though it was a lie. Wilbur commented on the shaking, and Tommy made some sort of joke about how if he got any steadier he'd finally be able to take Techno in a fight. Techno laughed at him and threw a cherry tomato at him at dinner. Tommy caught it and pretended to be offended when they all looked impressed. 'I am a big man' he swore. He had never felt smaller.

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"Want to go to the shops with me and Wil and Eret?" Techno asked from the doorway. Tommy hesitated only for a second before nodding. Techno raised an eyebrow when Tommy stumbled after standing. "You feeling okay? We can hang out later, We're not doing anything important anyway."

"Feeling fantastic, big man! My leg is just a little weird. It's been giving me fits for the last week," Tommy shrugged. It hurt, a dull ache that Tommy knew was because he'd been skipping his physical therapy routine in favor of sleeping the extra 45 minutes in the mornings.

"Ah, the joys of chronic pain. Did you take your meds today?"

"Took my morning meds with breakfast, yeah. Wil got them for me." Wilbur brought Tommy his meds when he took his own. He took his night meds with both Wilbur and Techno. He never took his pain meds. He was faintly sure he had two months' worth of them in the cabinet at this point.

"Want me to grab you a pain pill? You have them for a reason, you know."

"No, I'm fine. Where are we going?" Techno side-eyed him but must have decided against arguing. Tommy was grateful. The pain helped keep him feeling alive, in a sick sort of way. Proof he was real, he guessed.

“Eret wants to go to a thrift store, and Will wants to stop at the music store, apparently. We’ll probably get food or coffee, maybe stop and see Nikki. I’m not sure how either of us got roped into it, honestly.” Tommy snorted and followed Techno to Wilbur’s car. Eret was in the passenger seat, so Tommy and Techno crawled into the back seat.

“Gremlin child! Hello!” Wilbur greeted with a smile like sunshine. Tommy returned it, albeit more subdued.

“Hey,” Tommy replied, waving. “Hi, Eret.”

“Hi, Tommy! How are you?” Tommy was sick of that question, but he smiled at them and shrugged.

“I’m here. Existing and shit, y’know. How are you?” Something flashed in Eret’s eyes for just a millisecond before they smiled back.

“I’m good! Tubbo is driving me nuts, working on his hotel plan for his CADD class. I’m sure you’re just as sick of hearing about it.” Tommy knew nothing about a hotel, but he laughed and nodded anyway.

“You know how Tubs gets when he gets focused on a project.”

“I do, yeah,” Eret replied airily, turning back to look out the windshield as Wilbur pulled into the thrift shop parking lot. “Yess, I’m so excited! I love this place!”

“It smells like old ladies in here,” Techno deadpanned once they entered. Eret picked up the absolute ugliest shirt Tommy had ever seen and grinned.

“Ranboo will love this!”

“That is the worst shirt I’ve seen in my entire life!” Wilbur laughed. Tommy snorted.

“That’s *why* he’ll love it. You just don’t understand, Wil,” Eret teased. “Oh gosh, Tommy, this one is so you.” Eret held up another horrifically ugly shirt and Tommy actually let out a laugh at that. Eret grinned triumphantly. “I’m buying you this and you absolutely have to wear it or I’ll be sad.”

“Can I take a rain check?” Tommy asked sarcastically, flipping through the shirts in front of him.

“No shot. Help me look at dresses! I’m looking for something that screams ‘I got dressed in the dark’!”

“Why are you like this?” Techno grouched, already heading toward the bookshelves in the back corner. Tommy followed Eret to the racks of dresses obediently, and Eret gave him a look.

“So, how are you actually feeling?” Eret asked with a deceptive smile that made it obvious they were far more perceptive than Tommy had given them credit for.

“Why do you ask?” Tommy deflected.

“Well, one, Wil and Tech have been worried about you but haven’t told us, and two, *Tubbo* is worried about you, enough that he’s been pacing and telling about how weird you’ve been for the last month and a half.”

“I’m fine. I’ve started new meds. I guess they just don’t like the me who doesn’t always seem like I’m gonna explode.” Eret hummed.

“You’ve lost weight. You don’t look like you’re sleeping enough, either. You know your meds are actually supposed to make you feel *better*, right? You don’t look better.”

“The meds are definitely working. I can feel them working.”

“But do they make you feel good? A lot of people have to swap meds a few times until they find a combination that works for them.” They pulled a red dress out of the rack. “This is cute. No idea where I’ll wear it.”

“I feel fine. That’s really fancy, I feel like you’d have to wear it to like a Gala or something.”

“I’ll host a banquet, invite all the Royalty and be the hottest bitch in the room,” Eret laughed. “You don’t have to lie about how you’re feeling, you know. Your brothers wouldn’t be mad. AND we’re here for you, you’ve been adopted by all of us at this point, no chance of getting out of that, bud.”

“Really poor choice for adoption, frankly. I think you all have terrible taste,” Tommy snorted.

“Obviously, we kept Wil, didn’t we?” Eret teased with a grin. “But seriously, you’re a good kid. They won’t be upset if you need some help.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, thanks. What about this one?” Tommy held up a purple sundress with pink and blue hearts. “It’s not ugly, but It’s like, bi-colors.”

“Oh my gosh, I love that, gimmie!” Eret squealed, taking the dress from Tommy. Tommy snorted and shook his head. “Oh you’re officially coming with me on all my thrifting expeditions, I never would have found this!”

“Oh god,” Tommy fake complained.

Eret bought their new clothes, handing Tommy the god-awful red shirt with a grin, and they headed to the music shop. Wil apparently needed guitar strings, so he dragged Eret and Techno over to look at them while Tommy wandered toward the keyboards. The piano had a sign, saying ‘feel free to me!’, so Tommy sat and started plinking away a familiar tune he hadn’t played in years. It was a little off, the tempo wrong and a few wrong notes, but he was pleased to know he hadn’t lost all of his knowledge. He didn’t hear the other three approach.

“Tommy! I didn’t know you played the piano!” Wilbur gushed.

“Oh, I don’t, not really. I used to, haven’t in ages,” Tommy shrugged, standing up. “You get what you needed?” Wilbur looked at him for a second before nodding, holding up the small bag. Tommy gave him a small smile and followed them out of the store.

Once they got home, after a stop to Nikki’s barley where he was promptly force-fed a pastry he was not allowed to pay for, Tommy felt okay, for once. He wasn’t feeling great, mostly just running on adrenaline, but he felt okay. That went away pretty quickly when Phil knocked on his door.

“Hey, Toms. How are you doing?” He asked gently. Tommy plastered on a fake grin.

“Good! I had a lot of fun today with Wil and Tech and Eret.” Phil narrowed his eyes a little, looking for some lie in Tommy’s words, but must have not found one, because he smiled at him.

“I’m glad, you seem much better lately. I’m proud of you.” Tommy’s heart ached at that. Of course, Phil preferred the fake him. Tommy wasn’t sure why he was surprised. Nobody wanted a broken kid taking up space in their home.

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling a lot better. I’m kind of tired, though. I think I’m gonna take a nap.” Phil nodded at that.

“Sure, kiddo. I’ll wake you up for dinner.”

“Sounds good. Night.” Phil left the room, and Tommy flopped down on his bed with a groan. He really *was* exhausted. Everything made him tired, now, but especially keeping up the facade of ‘okay’ for several hours nonstop. He fell asleep quickly.

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Time continued like that for a while, Tommy feeling miserable 80% of the time, and nobody being the wiser, but as oft happens when pretending everything is fine, things have to come to a head eventually, and Tommy's downfall started the day Wilbur woke up in a bad mood.

Wilbur's bad days were few and far between, but when they came they came with all the fire and anger one would expect. He sat at the breakfast table glaring at his food for ten minutes before shoving it away and muttering a quiet 'this is fucking disgusting' and Tommy watched as Phil and Techno tensed.

"Bad day, Wil? Scale?" Techno asked. He always did that, asking for how Wil was feeling on a scale of one to ten. Tommy had asked once, but neither of them had been willing to explain where the behavior came from nor what the numbers meant. Tommy was pretty sure Phil didn't know either.

"A six, maybe. I'm going to my room," Wilbur replied tightly, pushing away from the table.

"You need to eat something first. I can make you a smoothie, or grab you a granola bar," Techno replied calmly.

"Don't talk to me like I'm a fucking child."

"I'm not talking to you like you're a child, I'm talking to you like you're my brother," Technoblade replied flatly.

"You're speaking to me the same way you talk to Tommy when he's having another breakdown," Wilbur snapped. Tommy winced at that.

"You'll find I spoke to you like this long before Tommy arrived, and I speak to him the same way because, coincidentally, he's my brother too."



“Oh, right. You totally used to talk to me like I was some fragile little bitch about to snap when we were teenagers. That’s absolutely the relationship we had.” Techno glared at him.

“He can fucking hear you, you know. You don’t need to act like a bastard just because you want everyone to be as miserable as you.” Tommy sunk down in his chair.

“Boys, there’s no need to fight-“ Phil tried, but both of them glared at him.

“There’s plenty of need to fight! Techno went from being someone who always had my back to being the calling boy to Tommy the second he arrived, and he got all weird and soft and now he likes to act like he’s always been like that so baby brother doesn’t know that he likes to pick fights for fun or likes to act like a 21-year-old sometimes instead of a therapist.”

“I never asked any of you to change how you act for me,” Tommy muttered, staring at his plate so he wouldn’t have to see the disgust in Wilbur’s eyes.

“No, you didn’t! You just showed up and weaseled your way in to the fucking family and we all just accepted it! I swear my friends only talk to me now so they’re kept up to date on how you’re doing! It’s so fucking easy for people to like you! It’s bullshit!”

“Well if it makes you feel any better I fucking hate myself enough to counteract everyone else,” Tommy snapped. “I never fucking asked to be here, I gave you a hundred opportunities to send me on my way before I ever fucking became someone you got attached to but you refused to let me go then, and now you’re mad at me for fucking being here!”

“I’m not mad at you for being here you dense motherfucker! I’m mad at you for making me care about you! I didn’t need anybody else, I didn’t want more fucking people to care about or more people to care about me, but you waltzed right in like a kicked puppy and fucked everything up!”

“Well if you’re so upset about it you should have fucking let me jump when I wanted to, bitch! Fucking pull the car around we can go back now, not like it matters anyway. I’ll be out of your stupid life and you can go back to having mental breakdowns about school and do whatever else you did before you fucking met me.” Tommy was standing now too, but as

soon as those words left his mouth he felt sick and dizzy. The whole table stood in stunned silence for a second, and Tommy closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and shook his head. “Fuck! I hate you.” Tommy brushed past Wilbur and went into the living room. He didn’t have the energy to climb the stairs right now.

The conversation started again but in hushed, angry whispers, and Tommy couldn’t be bothered to listen. He curled up on the couch and glared at his knees.

Techno came in a few minutes later and sat next to him on the couch.

“Hey, Tommy.”

“Hi,” Tommy mumbled, refusing to make eye contact.

“I’m sorry for him, he’ll apologize later when Dad’s done chewing him out.”

“He didn’t even say anything mean to me,” Tommy argued with a shrug. “Just a bad day for both of us I guess.”

“He was being a little mean,” Techno laughed, bumping his shoulder against Tommy’s. “Do you want to talk about why you’re having a bad day? We didn’t notice until the fight, you know you don’t have to hide when you’re not feeling great, right?”

“Yes, I do. Phil’s gonna send me away if I don’t,” Tommy huffed.

“A single bad day isn’t going to reverse all the progress you’ve made, kid. And if you’re still struggling, we’d rather you tell us than keep it bottled up, y’know?”

“I... know. Just hard, I guess.” Techno just hummed in reply.

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Later that day, Wilbur apologized, and Tommy brushed him off. He should have verbally forgiven him, but really, Tommy didn't want to think about it, and pretending like it didn't happen felt much easier.

School the following Monday was miserable. Both Tubbo and Ronboo were out- apparently they'd been hanging out despite Tubbo being sick and now they were *both* sick.

Somebody was teasing him, something about not having any friends since those two were gone, and Tommy was almost certain it was Purpled, though he was adamantly refusing to look at them. In fact, he fully ignored them for the entirety of what seemed like a years-long conversation that really couldn't have been more than a few minutes, until they grabbed his shoulder. Tommy wasn't really sure *what* happened, if he was being honest, but the next thing he knew he was being pulled of Purpled, whose nose was bleeding, by a teacher. Tommy was shaking so hard it was a miracle he didn't collapse then and there. Purpled looked somehow both annoyed and worried, his hands up in a placating gesture now that Tommy wasn't literally pummeling him.

"My fault, my fault, not his," Purpled insisted to the teacher, who was clearly not buying a second of it.

"Stop touching me," Tommy hissed at the teacher- Tommy was pretty sure he was actually just a sports coach- who still had his hands on Tommy's arms.

"You need to go to the principal's office. Now," The teacher snapped, still holding Tommy back like he was a rabid animal.

"If you intend on keeping your hands, I suggest you remove them," Tommy threatened. Purpled was now standing, looking panickedly between Tommy and the Coach.

"We'll add threatening a staff member to the list of things you'll be in trouble for," The coach huffed, letting go of Tommy, finally. "Both of you, office. Now." Tommy turned heel and stomped toward the front office, Purpled right behind him.

“Tommy, are you good, man? I’ve never seen you get like that!” Purpled asked, slightly jogging to keep up with the taller teen.

“Stop talking,” Tommy snapped. “Just shut up, will you?” Purpled deflated and nodded. When they reached the office, Tommy grit out a shaky, “We were sent here for fighting.” The secretary raised an eyebrow and gestured to them to sit. They did. They saw the coach go through to the office, and after a few minutes, he left with a glare.

“Thomas? Grayson? Come on back, boys,” The principal said surprisingly goodnaturedly. They followed him into his office, where they each took a seat and he looked them over for a moment before leaning forward, head resting on his folded hands. “Tell me what happened.”

“Didn’t Coach Asshole tell you?” Tommy huffed, crossing his arms. Purpled looked at Tommy like he’d grown a second head.

“Language, Thomas. But yes, he did give me a perspective of the ‘fight’,” He put fight in air quotes, “But it seems like maybe something else is going on here.”

“Purpled grabbed me, I hit him. Coach pulled me off of him and I threatened to take his hands off at the wrists if he didn’t let go of me.” The principal looked amused.

“And your side, er, Purpled?”

“I grabbed him, it freaked him out, he hit me in self-defense. The coach was being a jerk,” Purpled replied flatly. The principal pushed up his glasses and sighed.

“Purpled, I’m letting you off with a detention, please go back to your class. Get a slip from the secretary on your way out, please. You can fulfill your detention any day this week.”

“Yes, sir,” Purpled replied, leaving the room. Tommy sank down in his chair.

“Okay, Thomas. I want you to explain to me what happened again.”

“I already told you!” He protested.

“Why did you react the way you did to Gray-Purple grabbing you? Is something going on at home?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? It’s okay, if someone is hurting you-”

“Nobody is hurting me! I’m a fucking foster kid, I’m just jumpy, okay?” The principal sighed a bit at the swear word but didn’t comment on it.

“Thomas, I’m trying to be reasonable here, but if you don’t tell me what’s going on I’m going to have to call your guardians in. Even if it was provoked, you still injured a student and threatened a staff member. This is serious.”

“Nothing is going on! He just- scared me. I don’t like people touching me,” Tommy looked down.

“Okay. I’m going to call your foster parents to come to get you for the day. You can come back tomorrow.”

“That’s it?”

“I’m not an unreasonable man, and Purple did say he instigated the fight. I can’t send him home because I know he has track and field practice after school today, and missing said practice disqualified him from the next meet. This seems like a simple enough issue, does it not? Both of you get some time to cool off, and by tomorrow I expect everything will be right as rain. Go ahead and grab your things and come back to the office. I’ll make that call.”

Tommy nodded sharply and left for his locker. He pulled out his bag and stomped back to the office, where the secretary gave him a small smile. He sat down in one of the chairs and waited.

Phil was not happy, when he came to pick Tommy up. He went back into the principal's office for a few minutes, and when he came out, he looked *livid*. Tommy shrank down in his seat, but didn't protest when Phil took his bag and gestured for him to follow. When they made it to the car, Phil still looked angry, but was also looking at Tommy calculatingly.

"Are you alright? They said a teacher grabbed you." Tommy whipped his head around to stare at him.

"What?"

"Did they not?"

"I- yeah, he pulled me off Purpled." Phil nodded.

"So are you okay? He didn't hurt you, right?"

"I punched someone, and you're worried that the *teacher* hurt *me*?"

"Yes," Phil said like it was obvious. "Did he? I'm not against going back and kicking his ass myself, though I heard you threatened him pretty well on your own."

"Shouldn't you be mad at *me*?" Phil gave him a look, before shrugging.

"From what I understand it was self-defense. I don't condone punching your friends, but if you felt threatened it's good that you defended yourself. I'm not concerned about the fight, Tommy, I'm concerned about *you*." Tommy's head was spinning. This was not the lecture he was expecting to get. "Tommy? Are you okay?" He was *not* okay. His chest felt tight, and his

breathing was getting a bit erratic. Phil pulled the car over. “Tommy? Can you hear me, bud?”

Tommy tried to nod, but it probably looked a bit like a chicken bobbing its head. “Okay, can you follow my breathing? In-two-three-four Hold-two-three-four-five-six-seven Out-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight. Good job, again-”

Tommy was trying to listen, but his ears were ringing now, and Phil’s voice was muffled. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t see. He tried unsuccessfully to pull oxygen into his lungs, but all that happened was a choked wheeze. His heart was pounding in his ears, and he could faintly tell Phil had started tapping the breathing pattern on his arm, but he couldn’t follow it. He tried again to breathe, but his head was now swimming so much that he could barely feel his body. He could almost make out Phil’s panicked voice as everything went black.

# Chapter 33

## Chapter Summary

Tommy wakes up and this get,,, weird.

## Chapter Notes

Come get y'all's 'fluff', look at me, fixing the shit I broke for once.

I just like throwing y'all of your Rhythm by setting up super angsty shit then letting them talk to out like normal people. I want to keep y'all in a perpetual state of emotional whiplash.

also, exactly 86,000 words, look at me go. couldn't have done that shit on purpose if I tried

When his vision half-returned, Tommy was aware of exactly three things. One- he was completely unsure of where he was or what just happened. Two- someone was touching him. And Three- whoever that someone was sounded *terrified*. Tommy let instinct wash over him, gently shushing the person, reaching out half-blind to hold them, mumbling assurances of 'it's okay, I'm fine, you're fine, and everything is okay.' When what actually happened returned to him, he didn't stop comforting Phil, though he hugged him a little more aggressively. Phil was half laughing, holding on to Tommy just a little too tightly.

"You scared the shit out of me, mate," He wheezed, and Tommy realized he had gotten out of the car and moved to Tommy's side while Tommy was unconscious.

"What... even happened?" Tommy asked, still trying to get his bearings.

"You had a panic attack, and you passed out. You were out for nearly a minute," Phil replied, pulling away to look Tommy over carefully. "And when you woke up, you shushed me like I was a toddler." Phil looked a little exasperated at that, though mostly fond, and Tommy felt his face and ears go red.



“Sorry, I uh- force of habit.”

“I think I needed it, so I’ll let it pass, just this once,” Phil replied breathily. He was a little pale, shaking, and looked for all the world like he was looking at a ghost. Tommy snorted.

“That was a bad one, I’ve never passed out before,” Tommy said, pulling back completely and realizing his whole body ached from how tense he’d been. “Weird.”

“I- don’t get mad at this, but, are you taking your meds? They’re supposed to prevent that.” Tommy pursed his lips a little, and he contemplated lying and telling Phil he hadn’t taken them, but the idea made him feel a little sick.

“I’m taking them.”

“Tommy you can be honest with me,” Phil started, but Tommy shook his head.

“I *am* taking them, I swear. They just... make things worse, I think. I always feel really keyed up and fuzzy on them.” Phil looked confused for a second, then it softened into something not unlike sympathy.

“Mate, if they weren’t working right, why didn’t you say something?” Tommy shrugged and mumbled something mostly unintelligible. Tommy was pretty sure they weren’t even words, and he said them. “What?”

“I- you all seemed to like me better on them, and I didn’t want to get sent away,” Tommy admitted, only slightly louder, but Phil obviously heard, because he looked heartbroken.

“Tommy, We don’t like any version of you more than the others. We just want you to be happy. We’re still going to love you no matter what.” Tommy could feel the tears of agony and shame burning his eyes.

“Then... then why do you want to get rid of me?” Phil looked at him, clearly baffled.

“What are you talking about? Who said anything about getting rid of you?” Tommy’s eyebrows scrunched up in confusion.

“You did?” Phil looked confused for a moment then groaned.

“Oh my god, we did it again.” Phil rubbed his temples a bit before continuing, “One of these days we will have a conversation where both of us know what’s happening, I swear. Tommy, when I said we’d send you somewhere that could help, I meant like, a mental health facility, not a new foster home.” Tommy froze, processed it for thirty seconds, then, bafflingly, started laughing. Full, belting laughs that started to get right to the cusp of manic. Phil just sighed, his head in his hands, shaking from his own half-laughter-half-sobs.

“We have got to work on communication, big man, we’re going to kill each other one of these days,” Tommy breathed out between wheezes. Phil just shook his head. “Also, I can’t go to a psych ward, I do *not* look good in a dress, paper, or otherwise.” Phil started laughing again, and Tommy grinned.

“I still need to ask Margaret for those pictures.”

“Don’t you fucking *dare*,” Tommy hissed between giggles. “So- so you’re not putting me up for adoption for being a train-wreck?”

“No, I’m getting you a straight jacket for being a train wreck,” Phil agreed, trying to look serious, but he ended up breaking the second he met Tommy’s eyes, laughing again. Tommy snorted, and then a look crossed his face and he looked at Phil with an offended expression.

“You told Wil and Techno to tell me it was a good idea! There’s no *way* they were on board with locking me up!”

“You think it’s more believable that they were okay with kicking you out?” Phil asked, dodging the accusation.

“Uh-uh! Do Not Change The Subject, Mr. Watson! We can discuss my terrible self-worth in therapy, right now we’re talking about you convincing *Wilbur* to pretend like he agreed with the idea of putting me in a loony bin!” Phil groaned again.

“I didn’t want to scare you!”

“You did a real bang-up job of that, Big Man!”

“It was only, at *most* 70% my fault.”

“A solid 85.”

“I’ll concede to 80.”

“Fine, but we get to blame 10 percent on WII and Techno.” Phil huffed out another laugh and nodded.

“Deal.” Phil stood up from where he was kneeling outside the car, groaning as he did. Tommy quirked an eyebrow, a teasing smile playing on his face. “One old joke and I will have Techno make that *awful* soup concoction again.” Tommy feigned innocence.

“I wasn’t going to say anything!”

“Shut,” Phil threatened, pointing a finger at Tommy, who just snickered. Phil rounded the car, climbing back into the driver’s seat with a sigh.

“Can I drive?” Tommy asked, innocently.

“Absolutely not. Techno can teach you how to drive, I’m not getting near that with a ten-foot pole.”

“I’ve driven before!” Tommy lied.

“You absolutely have not.”

“Course I have, I’m a big man! The best driver you’ve ever seen!”

“I’m going grey,” Phil groaned, laying his head on the steering wheel.

“Is that why you wear the ugly hat?” Tommy asked with a snicker. Phil glared at him playfully before shaking his head and starting the car.

“I’m too old for this.” Tommy nodded sagely.

“It’ll be a race to see which of us end up in a home first, me for being nuts or you for being ancient and senile.” Phil just rolled his eyes, muttering about how ‘he’d show Tommy senile.’

When they arrived home, Wilbur and Techno rushed to the door to meet them. Well- Wilbur rushed to the door, Techno followed behind him at a leisurely pace.

“Where *were* you?” He screeched. “You say, ‘Tommy’s got in a fight’ then vanish for like, three hours!”

“Relax, Big Dubs. I passed out, we had a heart-to-heart, Techno’s gonna teach me how to drive. and we’re putting Phil in a home for being senile.”

“You *what?* ” Wilbur cried, fretting over Tommy like a worried mother.

“I’m doing *what?* ” Techno replied at the same time, looking baffled. “Oh, yeah, why did you pass out? Did you get your ass kicked that bad?” Tommy snorted.

“It wasn’t a *real* fight, I just punched Purpled because he grabbed me, it’s fine, I’ll apologize tomorrow and it’ll be fine. And no, I do not *lose* fights, Technoblade. I am a very strong and big man.”

“I need more information immediately,” Wilbur said, his voice *just* on the edge of panic. Tommy snorted.

“I was having a bad day, Purpled grabbed me, I hit him, a teacher pulled me off of him, Dad was mad at the teacher and not me, I had a panic attack and passed out, Dad freaked out, I found out he was not in fact planning on sending me to a new home, he just thinks I’m nuts, I asked to drive, he said Techno would teach me, then I bullied him for being old,” Tommy recanted, counting off each event on his fingers before looking to Phil for confirmation. “Did I miss anything?”

“You also called my hat ugly.”

“Oh! Yes, and his hat is ugly.” Tommy nodded seriously. “Also my meds don’t work and I feel like I’m going to explode.”

“Please don’t explode, that would be a nightmare to get off the ceiling,” Techno deadpanned. “Also, I’m not teaching you how to drive, Wil can do it.”

“Absolutely not,” Tommy and Phil replied in unison.

“I’m a great driver!” Wilbur whined.

“No,” Phil said with faux sternness. Wil pouted.

“Wait wait wait- you thought Phil was kicking you out? Why?” Phil flushed red at that.

“We may have... had a bit of miscommunication when I had mentioned the option of in-patient therapy,” He grimaced.

“80% your fault,” Tommy quipped.

“Brat,” Phil hissed with no venom. Tommy snickered. Techno was watching them with a strange look, something between amusement and utter confusion, but Wil just looked sad.

“Toms, did- when we talked about it, did you think we *also* wanted to send you away?” Techno’s eyes widened, and he looked at Tommy with a pained frown.

“I- I know *now* that you didn’t,” He hedged. Wilbur turned and glared at Phil.

“I told you this was a bad idea!” Phil grinned sheepishly and nodded.

“Yes, Wil, I know. We have established that it was 80% my fault already.”

“Why are you two in such a good mood!? This is a big deal!” Tommy started giggling again.

“I mean it’s either laugh or cry, and I’m *really* sick of crying lately, not gonna lie to you,” Tommy shrugged. Wilbur threw his hands up.

“Can we at least *pretend* to be emotionally stable? For like, once? I feel like this whole house is on the edge of a mental breakdown.”

“Oh, maybe we can get matching grippy socks in the psych ward!” Tommy exclaimed. Wilbur looked at him blankly for 30 seconds, and then he broke, laughing at the absolute absurdity of Tommy’s antics. Tommy shot a sly look at Techno, who could absolutely see through his bullshit and knew he was definitely actively defusing the situation. Techno just huffed out a laugh and shook his head.

“Okay, I’m hilarious, can I sit down, though? I do not need to pass out a second time today.” Wilbur stopped laughing long enough to look worried but Tommy was still smiling. He really was starting to feel exhausted after everything that had happened today, though, the absolute whirlwind of emotions making his usual pain feel worse. Wilbur gently led him to the couch, where Tommy promptly collapsed. The other three were quick to follow his example. “Serious talk time?” He asked, looking at everyone.

“Can I go first?” Phil asked Tommy, giving him a soft smile. Tommy shrugged, nodding. “Okay. First off, I am very sorry I didn’t realize the situation sooner, and I promise I will *clarify* what I’m saying from now on. You should never have to fear being kicked out of your home, or fear for your safety while you’re home, and I will do better to watch my words, I promise.” Tommy nodded.

“And I’ll try to ask for clarification when I need it rather than jumping to conclusions. I’ll work with Puffy on getting better at actually talking about what’s going on with me instead of deflecting everything with some thinly veiled trauma joke.”

“I’ll start searching for the brain cells this entire family has lost,” Techno muttered, rolling his eyes. “And uh- maybe trying to pay more attention when I think something is off instead of assuming I’m just paranoid.”

“You *knew* ?” Wilbur asked, looking baffled. Techno waved his hand in a so-so gesture.

“I had my suspicions the meds were off, and that Tommy was maybe hiding how he was feeling, yeah. I did not know he thought we were going to kick him out.”

“I thought he thought we were gonna kick him out, I had no clue about the meds.”

“Together we have the critical thinking skills of one whole person, Pog,” Techno snorted. Tommy laughed breathily.

“Between the four of us we might even be able to have a coherent thought,” he teased.

“Hey! Wait! This is serious talk time, not bully the family time!” Wilbur whined.

Phil snorted as the brothers started bickering. Things weren’t fixed, but he finally felt like maybe he was getting a grip on this. Maybe.

“Well at least I don’t eat *sand!*” Tommy shrieked.

“It was a *dare!*”

Or maybe not, but that... felt okay, for once.



# Chapter 34

## Chapter Summary

Good Days, Bad Days, and the ones in between

Tommy was going to pull his hair out. The teachers were all watching him so closely he felt like he was a lab rat. Three had pulled him aside to tell him they were there if he needed to *talk*. He would have appreciated it, maybe, if something was going on beyond him just feeling like shit, but as it were, he wanted to scream. Purpled was sporting his signature smile and a set of double black eyes when Tommy saw him, but he had laughed off Tommy's apology with a shrug and assurances that he was pretty sure 90% of his friends had given him a black eye, and at least Tommy hadn't *stabbed him*, which did *nothing* to assuage his concerns, and made him heavily question what he got up to when not in school. Tubbo was back finally, but he was still obviously sick, which stressed Tommy out. But, he was *talking* to Tubbo, which was nice. Even if the conversation had taken a weird turn.

"Do you ever think about what we'd be like if things were different?" was Tubbo's baffling question for the day.

"Different how?"

"Like, if Phil had adopted you as a baby, or if you were biologically his kid, or if my parents wouldn't have left me and Eret to fend for ourselves, or if... if things were different, y'know. If all the bad shit didn't happen."

"I don't think there's a world in which bad shit doesn't happen. I couldn't picture it if I tried."

"Have you ever tried, though?"

"It's impossible to imagine a color you haven't seen," was Tommy's equally baffling reply. Tubbo just gave him a solemn look and nodded.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

“You two know that made no sense, right?” Purpled asked from his seat across the table. They both gave him a look and shrugged.

Tommy had long since gotten used to the hidden meanings behind Tubbo’s questions. Questions of birds and stars that were really of the universe and higher powers. Questions of the past that were really of the present. Questions of the world that were really of him, of them. He didn’t think many people caught on, though, so he never answered them directly. It was like code, a secret language anyone could speak if they so wished.

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Home felt warmer, now. Tommy could feel it trying to burn away the chill that settled in his bones long before he came. Sometimes, he let it. He let Wilbur drag him into the living room to watch a film, he cooked with Techno, he reminded Phil that the work would be there in the morning.

Other times, he clung desperately to the cold. He scowled when Wilbur called him his baby brother, and refused to eat, and ignored the way Phil looked exhausted at breakfast. He hated those days. He didn’t even look in the mirror, knowing that the person staring back at him would be a stranger, grey eyes and angry, curled purple scars crawling up his neck and limp, ugly ash blonde hair hanging in messy curls around too prominent cheekbones.

Those days he scowled in therapy and swore and complained and paced, listening to Puffy’s gentle reminders that healing was not linear and that he had improved. Those days he’d hate himself for thinking of the way the cliffs called out to him. Those days he thought of graduation as an escape.

On the good days, he thought of the beach as little more than a beach, just sand and rocks and water, he saw graduation as nothing more than another day, months and months away and of little importance. There were more important things to worry about. Like Christmas, which was barreling toward them as the air chilled and the flowers wilted and the leaves changed from green to red to brown.

The first snow of the year was a good day. Tommy raced Tubbo and Ranboo through town, belting each other with snowballs that didn't pack together well, and drank warm apple cider with his brothers.

The second snowfall was hell.

Tommy woke up with a headache. The neon white light of sunshine reflecting off new snow blinded him, he managed to break not one, but *two* mugs trying to make himself a coffee, and only stopped trying because Techno had pulled him from the shattered glass and carefully bandaged his hands and told him it was fine.

He did not go to school. It was Friday, but he couldn't be bothered. He stowed away in his bedroom and blared music so loudly he could feel it, and he ignored the sharp, stabbing pains that shot through his head to the beat of the song. He kept his door firmly locked when Phil asked to come in. And still when his brothers came home from class and knocked and spoke to him through the door. He flaked out on Tubbo and Ranboo, who had wanted to go ice skating, and chose instead to tear at his hair, curled up on the floor of his bedroom.

Saturday he forced himself to leave his room. He did not manage to eat breakfast, but he choked down the frankly disgusting meal replacement shake Techno gave him.

"Do you want to talk about yesterday?" Wilbur asked softly, drinking an aggressively purple smoothie instead of eating breakfast himself.

"Bad day, I guess. Everything felt like too much," Tommy admitted with a sigh. "I hate feeling like this. Like I'm never going to be whole again."

"Toms, bad days are bound to happen. It doesn't mean you're broken, or that you're missing some innate part of yourself."

"I know, I know," Tommy groaned, resting his head on the table. "I just want to be normal."

“Normal is fake, nobody is normal,” Techno argued, sitting down with an actual breakfast.

“Then I want to be mentally well and not have a breakdown for no reason.”

“Don’t we all,” Tech replied flatly. “But none of us are exactly mentally stable, so instead we just have to figure out how to cope with the hands we’ve been given.”

“I fold,” Tommy sighed. “I don’t want to play this game anymore.” Wilbur and Techno both looked startled at that, and Tommy rolled his eyes. “Sarcasm, not serious, fucking relax.” They both did. “I’m going to have to change my entire sense of humor around you guys, aren’t I?”

“If your entire sense of humor is nihilistic jokes about wanting to die, yes,” Techno deadpanned.

“Well, fuck.”

“ *Tommy,* ” Wilbur whined, giving his brother sad eyes.

“Oh my god, you overgrown toddler, what do you want?”

“Talk to us. Stop deflecting!”

“Oh for the love of- it really was just an off day, I’m goin’ to have ‘em occasionally, it’s really nothing serious.”

“But you feel better now?” Techno asked, taking a bite of his food.

“Ehhh, I feel less like I’m going to combust, but I still feel like garbage, honestly. I think I’m going to force myself to go into town and Christmas shop just so I don’t Kay around and make myself feel worse.”

“It’s kind of early to be Christmas shopping, isn’t it?”

“It’s November. If I wait too much longer I’m going to have to fight an old lady for a pair of socks or something.” Techno scrunched up his face in displeasure.

“Yeah, alright. Maybe we can rope Dad into it too, make it a *family* adventure.”

“A proper Yuletide expedition.”

“Not it for getting him to stop working,” Wilbur quipped. Techno shook his head.

“I did it last time,”

“Okay, I pull him out of his office like 6 times a week, how are you acting like it’s even slightly fair that I have to do it?” Tommy protested weakly.

“But you’re so good at it! Just give him them big sad baby blues and he’ll be up in no time!” Wilbur teased.

“My? Eyes are grey?” Tommy replied, looking at Wilbur like he’d grown a second head.

“They only looked grey because of how pale you were and the circles under your eyes, now that you’ve actually got some color to your face they’re definitely blue.”

“Huh, they *are* blue, aren’t they? That’s weird. You kind of look like dad, honestly,” Techno mumbled.

“You remember that I’m not actually related to him, right?”

“Yeah, but, have you ever looked at the pictures of Dad when he was like 20? It’s actually kind of bizarre, now that I’ve noticed it.”

“Shocking, two people with the same eye color and hair color look similar, how odd,” Tommy drawled, standing up. “God, he’s such a nightmare to get away from his desk.” Wilbur snickered and Tommy flipped him off as he ascended the staircase. “Dad? Can I come in?”

“I’m working right now, bud,” Phil replied without looking up from his computer.

“It’s Saturday. The work will be there on Monday, when you’re actually supposed to be working.” Phil just sighed.

“Toms, I really-“

“We want to go Christmas shopping, as a family,” Tommy cut in, putting on his best sad voice. “We can’t be a family without you.”

“Oh you dirty little cheater,” Phil hissed with no venom.

“Pllleeeaaassseeee, Dad? For your sons, who you love dearly and would do anything for?” Tommy hopped forward and plucked Phil’s hat from his head, then retreated as Phil let out a sigh.

“I’m giving you a fifteen-second head start,” Phil warned, still looking at the computer but obviously no longer working. “Fifteen, fourteen-“ Tommy screeched and bolted from the

doorway, careening down the stairs and cackling loudly as he turned the corner.

“Save me!” Tommy screeched, ducking behind Techno.

“Save you from *what?*”

“I stole his hat! Run!” Tommy howled as Phil came into sight, a grin on his face.

“C’mon, Toms, nowhere to run now,” Phil teased, taking a step toward them. Tommy calculated the likelihood of making it past Phil, decided it wasn’t worth it, and bolted out the back door.

The snow was cold, wind whipping it around in swirls and stinging sharply at Tommy’s face as he skidded around the house and into the front yard. He had no shoes on, and his socks were now soaked, but when he heard Phil coming after him, he didn’t care. As soon as Phil was in sight Tommy ran right back into the house through the front door, nearly hitting Wilbur in his haste. Wil looked confused for only a second before seeing the hat and grinning widely. He ran back to the kitchen, tucking the hat in the fridge before turning heel and bolting upstairs, just as Phil came through the front door. Phil laughed loudly, following Tommy up the stairs and cornering him in the hallway. They were both slightly out of breath, though Phil was definitely worse than Tommy was.

“Give me the hat!” Phil panted, coming closer.

“Never!” Tommy teased, looking for a way out. Windows weren’t an option, but if he could make it over Phil he could definitely slide down the banister, so he shifted his feet, and just before Phil faux tackled him, he jumped. He was almost shocked at how well it worked, Tommy basically diving over Phil and rolling back to his feet, sliding down the banister about halfway before jumping off into the living room. He landed haphazardly on the couch, settling down like he’d been there the whole time. He grinned triumphantly at Phil when he came down the stairs looking bewildered.

“You... are not allowed to spend time with Clay anymore. I’m 100% blaming him for whatever parkour shit that was.” Tommy just shrugged in response.

“Tubbo was a gymnast, too. I’ll just learn how to do it more gracefully from him.”

“New plan! You’re not allowed to have friends! Now, *where is my hat?*” Tommy laughed.

“Guess we’ll never know.” Techno and Wilbur peeked their heads around the corner slowly, as if expecting to be caught, and roped into whatever shenanigans Tommy and Phil were up to. “I got him from his office!”

“There are better ways to get me from my office than *diving down the stairs!*” Phil exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. “Why are you like this!”

“My guess is it was the way I was raised.”

“Grey! I’m going grey!” Phil groaned, looking to his two oldest sons as if they would be of some help. “Were you two like this? Have teenagers gotten *worse* since you were kids!?”

“Need we remind you of Wil’s 15th birthday?” Techno teased

“Oh my god, None of you are allowed to have children, I can’t do this again.”

“Tommy’s still a teenager for another two and a half years, you have to *keep* doing this.”

“I’m moving out,” Phil huffed, moving to collapse on the couch. “You three can figure it out on your own. Homeownership is easy, just pay the taxes and don’t burn it down.” Tommy grinned wickedly at the opportunity.

“Again. Lookin’ at you, Wilbur.” Phil sputtered for a minute, but Wil, Techno, and Tommy were cackling.



“I’m too old for this,” Phil sighed. “Have kids, they said, it’ll be *fun* , they said.”

“We’re loads of fun!” Wilbur laughed.

“Fun like getting a tooth pulled,” Techno laughed. “Don’t worry Dad, you and I can run away and take over the world, I’m sure Wil can raise Tommy on his own.”

Phil just laughed airily and shook his head. “You three are somehow the best and worst people I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah, we love you too, Dad.”

# Chapter 35

## Chapter Notes

Yo we're at more than 50k hits and more than 90k words this is so wild

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Getting to the mall was significantly less eventful than the hour leading up to it. Phil hadn't found his hat, much to Tommy's delight, so he was pouting just a little, and Wilbur was writing out a list of things to buy on his phone that looked to be about 75 items long.

"Do you think Schlatt wears a medium or a large t-shirt?" He asked, frowning at his phone.

"I've actually been meaning to ask you about Schlatt. You told me you weren't friends," Tommy replied, ignoring the question. Phil and Techno snorted.

"We aren't friends," Wilbur huffed, haughtily.

"He's like the only person you ever hang out with besides Techno," Tommy deadpanned.

"I hung out with Eret not too long ago!"

"Wil."

"Wilbur refuses to accept that they're friends but they totally are," Techno quipped.

"We aren't friends! We're *enemies*. We hang out because you have to keep your enemies close, y'know."

“Ah yeah, I definitely call my enemies when I’m feeling sad too. Totally.” Wilbur pouted.  
“Also, get him a large.”

“I hate you.”

“Get in line.”

They got to the mall and Wilbur Immediately dragged Phil off to some random shop, leaving Techno and Tommy to wander a bit more aimlessly. Techno was quiet for like, two minutes, before he went back into big brother mode.

“How are you feeling?” Tommy gave him a weird look and shrugged.

“Uh, fine, I guess? Why are you asking?”

“You were having a bad day, but you seem fine now. I’m worried you’re just becoming a better actor.”

“Oh, yeah no I feel like garbage but no point in getting stuck in my head about it. Don’t want to bring down everyone’s mood just because mine isn’t good.”

“You know we don’t mind, right?” Techno asked, frowning at him for a second before his face broke into something soft. Tommy went to ask what he was looking at before he heard a screech that could only be from a toddler.

“Tech!!” Suddenly a child who could not be older than four was squealing and jumping in front of them, making grabby hands at Techno. Tommy couldn’t hold back the snicker at the way Techno grinned and picked the kid up, swinging them around a bit before settling them on his hip.

“Where on earth are your parents, Micheal?” Techno asked, looking around. He seemed to spot them, raising a hand to wave at a couple who were approaching with exasperated looks. They were carrying another kid, who was squirming only slightly, trying to get out of their parent’s grasp. “Found ‘em.”

“Tech Tech Tech, look at my cool shoes! They light up!” Micheal yelled, shaking his feet.

“Very cool, bud. Hey, guys, sorry,” Techno gave the couple a small smile. They both shook their heads.

“We’re getting him a leash, I swear,” The woman laughed, reaching out to give Techno a brief hug and poke her son a little. “What have we told you about running off?”

“But *Mom* ,” He whined. “It was *Tech*. ”

“Listen to your mother,” Techno teased, handing him over to who Tommy presumed was his father.

“How have you been, Techno? I know things have been hectic.”

“Yeah, I’m doin’ alright. This is my younger brother, Tommy. I’ve told ya about him.”

“Oh! Yes, we’ve heard so much about you! I’m Caroline, This is my Husband Oliver, and our sons Micheal and Connor.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am,” Tommy replied politely. Connor seemed to look into his soul for a moment before deciding he liked him, and reached out for him.

“Connor, behave yourself, you can’t just demand to be held,” Caroline chastised, but Tommy just laughed.

“Here, I can take him if you want.” She gave him a smile and handed the kid over, who immediately wrapped his arms around Tommy’s neck. “Hey, bud, nice to meet you too.” Connor just nodded, seemingly very comfortable. Techno gave Caroline and Oliver a *look* before smiling at Tommy.

“Thirty seconds and you’re already the favorite, typical,” Techno teased. Tommy rolled his eyes.

“Kids like me, they have excellent taste.” He bounced Connor a bit.

“He’s not usually so calm,” Oliver snorted. “I’m surprised he’s not trying to yank out your hair.” Tommy let out a dramatic gasp.

“Connor, do you hear this slander? How can you stand for this!” Connor made a huffy noise before repeating,

“S’ander.” Tommy snickered.

“Exactly! We must defend your honor!” Tommy whisper-yelled, putting on a mock offended voice.

“Yeah, gon- gonna beat ‘em up.” Connor raised a small fist, still very much leaning on Tommy’s shoulder. Tommy shook with silent laughter.

“You get ‘em, bud.” The three adults were looking at them with very soft expressions. “Oi, I can see you three, you aren’t slick.” They all laughed a little, and Tommy went to hand Connor back to his mom only to be met with a whine.

“Nooo,”

“You gotta go back to your mom so you can finish your shopping, buddy. I’m sure I’ll see you next time you visit Techno, okay?” Connor stuck out his bottom lip, pouting. “If the wind changes, your face is gonna get stuck like that, you know.” Connor’s face straightened out, looking very serious.

“Nuh-uh!”

“Yes huh. Gonna look like a sad puppy forever and ever!” Tommy teased, gently bopping the kid’s nose.

“ *You* look like a sad guppy,” Connor grumbled, sticking his tongue out. Tommy grinned.

“Well, then we’ll match, don’t want that, do we?”

“No! I dun’ wanna match with you, you’re mean.” Tommy dramatically gasped.

“I’m *mean*? Well, I guess if I’m so mean you should go back to your mom then, huh?”

“Yeah! Momma’s nice!” Tommy nodded and handed him back over.

“You’re right, she seems very nice.” Tommy grinned at him. Connor just crinkled up his face. Tommy crossed his eyes, wrinkling up his nose, and Connor giggled.

The family said their goodbyes, with promises to arrange a time for them to visit Techno soon, and Tommy and Techno headed off in the opposite direction.

“You’re surprisingly good with kids,” Techno commented as they wandered through a store.

“It’s not *that* surprising.”

“Sure as hell surprised me.”

“Why? I’ve told you before, I used to take care of the kids in homes.”

“Yeah, but I dunno, I expected it to still be *you* , just less swearing or something, but it’s another one of your like 45 personalities, I swear I keep having to meet you over and over again.”

“It’s still me, big man. It’s not that deep.”

“I’m not-” Techno let out a frustrated huff. “That’s not what I mean. I keep thinking I have you figured out, and you keep throwing these curveballs, you know? At this point, I’m not sure how I’m still surprised.” Tommy just shrugged.

“You’ll get used to it eventually. Or you won’t. If it’s any consolation, I think you’ve seen every side of me at this point.”

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Techno had not, in fact, seen every side of Tommy, which became obvious to him the day he came out of his bedroom one morning feeling incredibly sick. Tommy glanced up from where he was nursing a cup of tea and promptly groaned.

“Oh god, you too?”

“Wha-?” Techno mumbled, heading toward the kitchen.

“Nope, you aren’t cooking anything. Dad and Wil are sick too, what the *hell* did you three do, lick a public transport window or something?”

“ ‘m fine,” Techno weakly argued, but Tommy was already dragging him into the living room, where both Phil and Wilbur were wrapped up in blankets and dozing. “Why aren’t *you* sick?”

“Probably because I wash my hands,” Tommy huffed, “Unlike you, who has eaten lunch covered in garden soil before. I also got my flu shot, which none of you did apparently.”

“Phil, Tommy is bullying me,” Techno whined when he was forced onto the couch next to Wilbur.

“Nothin’ I can do, mate, I’m dying.” Tommy was cleaning off the thermometer and putting a new cover on it when Techo looked back at him.

“Wha- are you doin’?”

“Shut up and open your mouth.” Techno complied, and when the thermometer beeped Tommy’s eyebrows furrowed a bit.

“Okay, I’m going to grab you a fever reducer, you’re kinda warm.” Tommy was out of the room and back with the pills and a glass of water in what was either two seconds or two days, though Techno wasn’t sure because his head was swimming. “Take these.”

Techno watched Tommy nervously flit throughout the house throughout the day, cleaning so much Techno was pretty sure there wasn’t a germ left in the place. Something was cooking, and it smelled *great*, but he could also faintly smell bleach from the kitchen, which surprised him a little. He slowly made his way there only to see Tommy disinfecting the place. The counters had obviously already been cleaned, and Tommy was now wiping down the cupboards.



“What are you doing?”

“Why are you up? Go back to the couch!”

“I’m hungry, and need more water, and it smells like a hospital in here.” Now that Techno was paying attention, he saw the large stockpot on the stove.

“I’m *cleaning*. Which I’ll have to do again now that you’ve got your germs all over the place. Go back to the living room, I’ll bring you three soup when it’s done, should only be a few more minutes.” Techno pouted, but went back to the living room as instructed, where Phil and Wilbur were half awake watching some documentary on the television. “Tommy’s bringing soup.”

“Oh god, Tommy *cooked*? ” Wilbur whispered. “Does he know how to cook? Are we going to get food poisoning?”

“Be nice,” Phil hissed.

Tommy brought in three bowls, handing one of them to each of the other three while pointedly looking at anything but them. “Soup. Eat.” The soup looked normal, mostly, celery and chicken and noodles, though it was a little on the yellow side, but when Techno took a bite, he let out a surprised hum. It was *really* good. Something not quite spicy but very warming and a little acidic immediately made him feel just ever so slightly better. Wilbur was also clearly enjoying it, equally pleased, but Phil was staring at Tommy like he’d done something insane.

“Where did you learn to make this?”

“What? It’s just chicken soup,” Tommy replied, laughing.

“This... this is my grandmother’s recipe. I’m sure of it,” Phil hummed. I haven’t had it since my mom passed, they never gave it to me, just my sister.” Tommy gave Phil a strange look.

“Uh, one of my foster sisters taught me it... years ago, now. God, probably half a decade at this point. I can write it down for you or something.”

“What was her name?”

“Oh, uh, Clementine. Clem. Why?”

“No, I- my sister had a kid, but I’m pretty sure it was a boy, Harry or, or-”

“Henry?” Tommy was staring at Phil, pale. Phil just nodded, looking almost excited.

“Yes, yes, that was it! Henry!”

“Holy shit- holy shit,” Tommy laughed. “Henry- Henry is Clementine. She transitioned when she was fourteen. I knew her.” Phil looked confused.

“Why was she in foster care?”

“Her mom was flat broke. Couldn’t keep a roof over their heads. Gave her up. Holy shit, this is *so wild*. ”

“Where is she now?”

“Oh- long gone. She left the second she turned 18. We always talked about meeting back up after I turned 18, but I have no clue where she is, we haven’t spoken since she got out.”

“Why didn’t they send her to me? I’d be next of kin, wouldn’t I?” Phil looked dazed and his words were getting a little slurred, clearly still exhausted from the illness.

“I don’t know, I have no idea how it works. But, shit, she basically *raised* me, people used to think we were siblings, looked just like her, hell, I *talk* like her half the time, she was the closest thing I had to family for years.” Tommy perked up. “Oh, oh my god, How did I not realize sooner, hold on!” Tommy yanked out his phone, peeling off the case to reveal a slightly crinkled photo booth strip, handing it to Phil. There were two kids, one of them obviously a younger Tommy, and the other... well, she was clearly related to Phil. They had the same jawline, same nose, same crease in their forehead when they smiled. “It’s been bugging me since you two said I looked like Phil, because there’s only one other person I’ve ever looked like, besides my actual parents. And it was *her*.” Phil had a few tears in his eyes.

“I... huh.”

“I guess it makes sense I was so quick to accept this as family, doesn’t it? I was basically already part of it.”

“What- what’s she like?”

“Stubborn as a mule, Loyal to a fault, a temper like a firecracker and the fashion sense of a blind person. Must be genetic.” Techno noted how fond Tommy looked talking about her.

“Could you have been related to her?” Wil asked, looking over his dad’s shoulder to look at the photos. “You really do look alike.”

“Nope, we traced our family back like six generations just to prove a point once. Not related at all.” Tommy looked at Phil, who still looked shell-shocked. “You okay, big man?”

“I had family, I had family living here the whole time and I never knew.” Tommy’s face fell.

“When I find her, I’ll bring her back to meet you. She always wanted a family when we were younger.”

“She- you said she raised you.” Tommy nodded. “How do you mean?”

Tommy thought back to the group home he was first in at 9 years old. He was only alone for a few minutes when a boy with stringy blonde hair and a bandage across his cheek came into the room, giving Tommy a once-over and a nod. ‘Don’t be scared, I’m gonna protect ya.’ The kid has promised. He thought about Clementine’s 14th birthday when she cried and told Tommy she didn’t feel like a boy. Tommy remembered telling her he’d always wanted a sister, anyway, and he remembered helping her pick her name. He remembered her teaching him how to cook, how to stop a panic attack, how to throw a punch, how to treat a wound, how to check for a concussion. He remembered her teaching him how to hide the money he got from odd jobs, her teaching him how much of each pay he should save in case he ever needed to get away. He remembered her helping with his homework, them both teaching the younger kids to read, her showing him how to hold a baby, how to read people’s body language, how to lie without breaking eye contact.

“She... all of the best parts, and several of the less than ideal parts, of me are because of her. I’m who I am because of her.” Tommy looked at Phil with a sad smile. “You would have been proud of the person she was. Is.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Phil smiled. Tommy glanced around, stopping when he realized Techno was looking at him strangely.

“What?”

“You’ve surprised me, once again.” Tommy huffed.

“46?”

“46,” Techno agreed, and at the strange look Wil and Phil gave them they just laughed.

## Chapter End Notes

C'mon, did you think I mentioned a foster sister who Tommy looked just like then 12 chapters later mentioned him looking like Phil coincidentally? I'm playing 8D chess over here y'all.

## Chapter 36

### Chapter Summary

It felt like homecoming. It felt like failure. It felt like progress.

“Tell me about her,” Phil prompted Tommy the next evening.

“Who, Clem? What do you want to know?”

“Anything you’re willing to tell me, I guess. You seem to care a lot about her.”

“I do. She... well, honestly, I don’t think you’d *like* her much. You’d love her, care about her for sure, but you wouldn’t like her.”

“Why’s that?”

“She doesn’t see things as you do, she never sees things as something that can get better, I guess? She always was very insistent on the fact that the future was irrelevant, that the only thing that mattered was what was happening in the present. She didn’t believe in the future being *better*, it was always just learning how to deal with a situation so the next time it happened you’d be ready.” Tommy shrugged. “She taught me a lot. Lots of things I have to unlearn now, lots of things I don’t think I ever *will* unlearn.”

“Like what?”

“She taught me to hide weaknesses, and how to exploit others’. Taught me how to fight dirty and how to lose with grace when I picked a fight I had no chance of winning in the first place.”

“Why just not pick those fights?”

“If it was a fight worth having, it was a fight worth losing,” Tommy said with a smile. “She taught me how to lie, and lie well. How to say a lot of things that sound very important and personal so people think you’re an open book without ever actually letting them know you. She taught me how to steal food and pickpocket and how to seem scarier than you are.”

“I... you seem so fond of her, but, that doesn’t sound like a very good relationship,” Phil said carefully.

“No, no she taught me good things too, how to cook, how to talk to kids, how to ride a bike, how to swim, how to trust myself to be what I needed to be. I have so many good memories of her, but I- I always think of this one time, she came back to the group home after being somewhere else and she sat me down in my room and used the fact that she needed medical attention as a way to teach me wound care,” Tommy laughed bitterly. “It was the scariest day of my life at the time, I was like 13 and we stitched her leg up with a curved needle and nylon thread, we disinfected it with fuckin’ grain alcohol. She didn’t even flinch when I fucked it up, just made me do it again and again until I got it right because there was always a chance I would only get one shot at it some other time. She was the strongest and bravest person I’d ever met, and I wanted to be just like her.” Tommy shifted uncomfortably. “Now, though, I really just wish she could have found someone to help her. She shouldn’t have had to do that on her own. I kind of got my wish, I guess, I do act just like her, but...”

“But?”

“But... being like her makes it harder to be like *me*, I guess. I spent so much time making sure I could step up and fill her shoes when she left that I never actually took the time to figure out who I was. I don’t blame her, she was only trying to protect me, to protect all of us. She did her best, and she tried so hard to keep the kids from anything *bad*, and she made sure I did the same, always making sure the kids got to be kids as long as possible.”

“But she didn’t do that for you,” Phil said reasonably.

“No. She always said we were just alike, us against the world, equals, y’know? And she believed it. She never treated me like a kid, we were always on even ground, and I wanted that, then, I never wanted anyone to see me as just a kid, but I *was* just a kid. I was a kid at

ten when I learned how to fix a dislocated shoulder, a kid when I got my first job, a kid when I learned to pretend to not be hungry so the other kids got more to eat.” Tommy had tears running down his face, but he continued speaking anyway. “I was a kid when I was learning how to keep her from overdosing, a kid when I was giving myself alcohol poisoning in a field with strangers, a kid when I was teaching toddlers to tie their shoes and brush their teeth and when I taught kids just like me to do the same things she taught me. It keeps me up at night, wondering how many kids I *hurt* when I was trying to keep them alive.”

“You did your best, you both did.”

“I know. I’d do it again in a heartbeat, because those were important lessons for us to learn, but I wish things were different. She deserved better, and... so did I. Later, I changed up how I taught kids. I taught them to hold their tempers and how to study hard and make something of themselves, how to make themselves desirable for good families, you know? How to believe they were worthy of love and that it was okay to have feelings. And that was all her, too, in a way. Because she should have had someone to teach her that, and didn’t. I miss her, I hope she’s doing better now.”

“I’m really proud of you, Toms, you know that?” Phil was looking at him like he was something, someone, worth loving, and it warmed Tommy to his core.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too.”

—

Four days of pathetically sick family members later, they were finally, *finally*, recovering, and Tommy was so glad. He loved them, but he was so tired he was pretty sure he was going to collapse. Between disinfecting the house, cooking, bringing them food and medicine, and trying to keep up with the school work that was burying him, he felt like he was dying. When he came into the kitchen only to find Technoblade at the stove, he almost sobbed in relief.

“Feeling better?”



“Yeah, I actually feel really good today. Dad seemed to be feeling a bit better too, Wil’s still being a baby.”

“They’re both up?” Techno gave him a weird look.

“It’s like, 11 am, yeah they’re both up.” Tommy floundered for a minute.

“What? Why the hell didn’t you wake me up? My alarm must have not gone off-“

“I turned your alarm off last night before you went to bed. You haven’t been taking care of yourself.” Tommy scowled.

“I’m not the one who’s been sick.”

“Tommy. When was the last time you had a second to yourself?” And Tommy froze. “Yeah, exactly. You deserved the rest.”

“But- I- you were *sick* .”

“And now I’m not. You did a good job, but you gotta look after yourself too. I made you food.” Tommy did something so out of character at that moment that it startled even himself, and started crying. Everything was so overwhelming, all the time, and he cried a lot since moving here, far more than he had in years, surely, but this felt so much more. It wasn’t just one emotion bubbling up, it was all of them, every bad and good thought he’d ever had and felt was squeezing at his chest and running down his face. He made a pathetic noise and sat down on the kitchen floor. Techno was frozen, staring at him, but Tommy was too busy sobbing to even try to explain what was happening. He was faintly aware of Phil coming in, of Wilbur in the doorway, and then Phil was *holding* him, and he just cried harder at his gentle words.

“Shh, it’s okay, we gotcha, bud,” Phil whispered to him, and Tommy clung to him like a lifeline and sobbed harder.

“I just told him I made food!” Techno defended, now moving to sit in front of him.

“I don’t think you did anything, Tech, I think Tommy’s just feeling a little overwhelmed.” Tommy whined a bit when Phil pulled away. “I’ll be right back, I’m just going to grab you a blanket, you’re shivering a bit, and you feel kinda cold, kiddo.”

“I’ll get it,” Wilbur rasped from the doorway, vanishing and coming back a few seconds later with every blanket that was in the living room, as well as several pillows. Wilbur just shrugged at the amused looks from Phil and Techno. “What? We’re gonna be here for a bit, might as well be cozy.” They snorted at that, and Wil started piling blankets around them. Tommy’s tears had somewhere along the way gone from sobbing to *heaving*, and he was gasping for breath between hacking, pitiful whimpers. Phil just rubbed his back and held him, humming softly and not even complaining while Tommy definitely ruined his shirt.

“It’s okay, Toms, we’re right here,” Phil whispered to him, “You’re safe, you’re okay.” And fuck if that didn’t just make him break, his voice strained and hands trembling as he released Phil to curl in on himself, nails digging into skin for less than a second before his hands were pried away and held firmly. There were so many thoughts racing through his head that it wasn’t even coherent, but the main one was just that, *safety*.

How long had it been since Tommy was safe? How long had it been since Tommy had a moment to himself? How long had it been since he was taken care of, instead of taking care of someone? He was safe with Margaret, all soft smiles and firm commands, safe with Clem, who was always at his side, always watching his back, but did he ever *feel* safe? Did he ever actually relax, then? How long had it been, since his guard was down? He thought of being a toddler curled up with hunger pains and the only smells of the house being trash long overdue to be taken out and booze and drugs, of being a pre-teen and the smell of blood, of sweat and iron as he tried so hard to learn to be strong, of being a teenager and the smell of liquor and stale cigarettes and fresh-cut grass on sleepless nights, he thought of shouting, of harsh words directed at him and the people he needed to protect. He thought of commands to be *stronger*, to be more than the person they were trying to break him down into. He thought of nights locked in too-small rooms, of choking down his own panic, of soothing small children, of screaming and the sounds of noses and jaws and knuckles breaking after throwing a punch, the sounds of tires screeching down back roads. Thought of parents telling him he was too much, of social workers saying he wasn’t enough, of his *family* telling him they loved him anyway, of movie nights and popcorn and trips to the mall and soft sweaters and kind words,

of fights that always ended in soft-spoken apologies, always ended in promises to be better that were always kept. He thought of ocean breezes and sand and laughter, of inside jokes with his friends and notes passed in classes and teachers who smiled at him when he knew the answers to questions they asked.

He thought of all of the good, all of the bad, of all of the things in between that just *were* . He mourned the loss of himself, mourned the childhood he'd never gotten a chance to have, of all the lessons he should have never had to learn.

And finally, finally, he felt like he could breathe again. His sobs slowed to silent tears, pattered off until he was just breathing deeply, and he felt lighter, like he'd finally gotten whatever bees were rattling under his skin out and he settled back into his own bones for what may have very well been the first time. It felt like homecoming. It felt like failure. It felt like *progress*.

# Chapter 37

## Chapter Summary

Christmas Pt. 1

## Chapter Notes

Hi, This is important, please read it.

I had a comment on this fic a few minutes before I uploaded this chapter where someone was very angrily telling me that someone called the fic unrealistic and blah blah whatever.

First of all, I looked into it, and the video was LITERALLY them recommending their favorite fics??? So like, why be pressed, it was very very complimentary.

Secondly, and WAY MORE IMPORTANTLY: This fic? Is SUPER unrealistic. It's supposed to be. The way I portray the foster system, the way I portray recovery, and the sheer bizarreness of this fic is all very intentionally unrealistic. I want to make it abundantly clear to y'all- If the things that happen in this fic happened to real people, the results would be VERY different.

There is a next to 0 percent chance that a kid would go through 60+ homes in 8 years in a realistic foster care system, and a 0 percent chance they would be so skewed towards violently abusive homes. That's all just plot advancement shit, that's not how it works.

Tommy would have died in the house fire. And if he would have survived, he would have been permanently disfigured and injured for the rest of his life in a way that would forever impact him. He would not have been up and moving around in a month. He would not have been off his pain meds in a few weeks.

Tommy's addiction would not have been solved by just quitting cold turkey and have no lasting effects until a relapse.

Tommy would not have gone from wild self-destruction and self-hatred to self-awareness in 8 months.

Please, for the love of all that is holy do not look at this and say it is an accurate depiction of the topics discussed.

do not come to me when someone makes a comment about those things and expect me to be on your side.

I've deleted the comment. I'm not linking the video, it was a TikTok I think? (I don't have one, my partner found it for me lol) but I'm leaving it at that. Their video was very sweet and I appreciate them thinking of me when recommending things to read.

Don't hate on other creators in my comments. You are not welcome here if you do.

Enjoy the chapter.

Christmas came with surprisingly little fanfare, a prelit plastic tree and a dozen ornaments that had seen better days, four ugly stockings hanging on the stair banister, and cookies from Nikki's bakery that were eaten well before the day itself.

The morning of, Tommy woke up with the sun. He made coffee and tea like he always did, and carefully brought down three neatly wrapped gifts that had been hidden in his room for a month and sat them at his family members' usual seats in the living room. Phil woke up next, later than he typically would, carrying his own stack of gifts, four of them, which confused Tommy a bit, but he didn't question it much. Techno and Wil leave their rooms at the same time, Techno carrying two gift bags and a box, and Wilbur carrying a shockingly large box with two much smaller ones balanced on top.

"Gifts gifts gifts! It's my turn to give first this year!" Wilbur sang, flopping down on the couch. Tommy snorted and brought in their drinks, which they all took while Tommy sat on the edge of the coffee table. Wil was bouncing in his seat, his hair messy and standing up in early every direction. He tossed a box to each Phil and Techno and then very gently handed the biggest one to Tommy. It was *heavy*, and Tommy half wondered how the hell Wilbur had carried it down the stairs without dropping it. "Open! Open!"

"How do you have so much energy? Jesus," Techno grumbled, starting to peel the tape back on his gift.

"It's *Christmas*, Technoblade! Christmas! The one time a year nobody gets to complain about gifts!"

"Oh I will still complain, don't worry," Techno joked.

“Seconded. What the hell is in this, Wil, *rocks*?” Tommy laughed, not making a move to open his, choosing instead to watch the other two open theirs first. Techno snorted and finally pulled his gift out, a book about what seemed to be Roman Emperors. There was also a small box, which he opened to reveal a set of four gold rings, each engraved with a series of roman numerals that were just slightly too small for Tommy to read from his position on the couch. Techno clearly read them and knew exactly what the numbers were, because his whole face softened, and he reached over and pulled Wilbur into a hug.

“What are they?” Phil asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“I- they’re dates,” Techno choked out. “The date I came home, The date Wil came home, The date my adoption papers went through.”

“There’s four of them, though.” Techno laughed a little, nodding.

“The last one is when *you* came home, Tommy. When the family became, y’know, complete. God, this is so sappy, if I cry I will never forgive you Wil.”

“Worth it!” Wilbur chirped, grinning widely. Phil had a very concentrated soft look on his face, and he opened his own gift, pulling out a small bag and a picture frame. He grinned widely, flipping the photo around to show a picture that must have been taken before the fire, because it was Tommy looking offended and Techno and Wilbur laughing on the front porch of the old house, and Tommy remembered that day- they had been playing something, some sort of board game, and Tommy had realized Wil and Techno were *both* cheating, and he’d kicked up a fuss. Someone else was there, Nikki, maybe? She must have taken the photo. Phil opened the bag and pulled out a small keychain that made Phil laugh loudly. He held it up to show it was a Crow with a familiar green and white bucket hat on. Tommy snorted. Wil was convinced Phil had some innate connection with the crows that lived in the trees behind the house, because they always brought Phil shiny objects and sat watching him whenever he was outside.

Then it was Tommy’s turn, and he pulled at the wrapping paper with trembling hands and gasped a little at what he saw. It was an electric keyboard, the same style as the one Tommy had mentioned looked cool in passing months ago. Tommy was already near tears when he saw a few sheets of paper in a plastic sleeve taped to the front. Tommy recognized the names on the tops of the handwritten sheet music immediately. They were Wilbur’s songs.

“It’s a little conceited, maybe, but I figured, y’know, it’d be nice to have a little bit of me if you end up moving out after graduation,” Wilbur explained with a sheepish grin.

“I love it, I love them, *thank you* ,” Tommy said, holding back his own tears. Wilbur beamed and Tommy shot him a playful glare. “Oi, dickhead, You weren’t supposed to make me cry, either.”

Techno went next, handing Tommy the smaller of the two gift bags with a grin. He gave Wil the box and Phil the other gift bag. Wil opened his first, pulling out a ukulele that was already decorated with a series of stickers. Wil giggled, strumming it despite it being wildly out of tune, and layed a head on Techno’s shoulder. Tommy knew that gift already, he had gone with Techno to pick it out because he got Tubbo a uke as well. Phil went next, pulling out a t-shirt that said ‘I make 85 look like the new 40’. Tommy and Wilbur howled at Phil’s deadpan expression.

“Thanks, Tech, I love it,” He said with a resigned sigh.

“There’s more,” Techno prompted, and Phil shook his head and pulled out a small box, but when he opened it, his face broke into a smile. He held up a pocket watch that was styled to look like a compass. It had the words ‘ *However far we wander, We know time will bring us Home* ’ engraved on the cover and their names engraved around the face.

“Oh,” Phil breathed out. “Oh, Techno,” Techno grinned.

“I personally think the shirt is the superior gift, but…”

Tommy sat down the bag Techno had given him to inspect the watch, and it was pretty much immediately buried under the scraps of wrapping paper that decorated the living room. None of them immediately registered he hadn’t opened it through the quiet fondness that permeated the room.

“Brat.” Phil spat out with no malice. “Tommy, do you want to go next?” Tommy swallowed and nodded, gesturing to the boxes at their feet. They each picked them up, and Tommy bounced his knee anxiously. Wilbur tore into his immediately, pulling out first a sweater in a

soft blue color, and immediately threw it on over his sleep shirt, a wide grin on his face. He then pulled out the second gift, a set of guitar strings and picks. Then he pulled out the letter. He was reading it, and as his eyes moved down the page, his face went from a wide smile to a watery look of adoration.

“Oh, Toms,” Wilbur started, and Tommy just smiled at him. “Can- Can I read it out loud?”

“Sure,” Tommy agreed, rubbing his neck.

“It says-

*‘Wil,*

*I thought for a while about the right gift for you, sat, and pondered over the words I could write here to even begin to explain everything I want to say.*

*First off, I want to say thank you.*

*Thank you, for being there on the nights when I can't sleep. When I get too caught up in my own head to relax, you've always been there, right by my side, keeping me standing when all I wanted to do was collapse. Thank you, for never letting me.*

*But more than that, I want to say thank you, for loving me, when you didn't have to. I'll never be able to repay you for all the times you've been there, all the times you've helped me when you didn't even know you were doing it. I like to joke about how I feel like I'm the older brother, but it's always been you, hasn't it? You've always been this source of light to cut through all the grey that seemed to follow me for so long.*

*And I know that so many people think you're nothing but sunshine, but it's okay that sometimes there are clouds, and there are storms, just don't let yourself drown because they convinced you the water wasn't real.*



*I'll always be there to keep you afloat, I promise.*

*I'll never have better words to say what I feel than this:*

*I love you, and no matter how things change years down the line, that's never going to change. I will never forget the things you have taught me, I will never forget the ways you have made me better. I am lucky to have you at my side. I am lucky to have you as a brother.*

Toms' "Tommy flushed a little red at the way Wilbur's voice broke as he read it. Phil was definitely crying. Techno looked like he might, too.

Techno went next, opening his gift and pulling out first a deep red blanket, which he wrapped around himself. He pulled out a small book of 'Greek Myths They Never Tell You About' and then he unfolded his own letter. He glanced at Tommy, who nodded, and began reading it aloud.

" 'Techno,

*I'm no English major, but I have so many things to say and I know I'll never bring myself to say them any other way. '" Techno huffed out a laugh. " 'For so long, I've always watched my own back. Even when I had someone there, I never quite trusted them to save me if push came to shove. But with you, I know, if it ever came to it, I know you would. You're so much more than what meets the eye, and you've always been there when I needed someone to remind me that I am more than who I see myself as.*

*You taught me I didn't need to be a hero. And you inspire me at every turn to be more than just another tragedy. You've been a sense of stability I never knew I was missing, been the Earth beneath me when I felt like I was about to fall.*

*Thank you, for believing in me when no one else did. Thank you, for believing in the person I could be rather than the person I thought I was.*

*Nobody before you ever understood how to get past my walls. They were too high, too thick, too fortified to even try, but you came along and just blew them away, and through the smoke you walked me out of my comfort zone and back to the land of the living, and you helped me pick up the pieces of what was left. You always know what to say, always know the right words to force me to be honest with you, and with myself. Sometimes I wonder if people see straight through me, like I'm not even there, some ghost of a person who doesn't exist anymore. But you always look at me, the real me, behind 46 different masks and facades and personas, and pick out the parts that are real.*

*You called me Theseus, and I always blew it off as a joke that I didn't understand the punchline to, but it was more than that, it was a warning, the first sign that you saw what I was and who I was becoming and that you didn't want that for me.*

*I can't ever promise I'll let the walls go completely, but I can promise that you'll always have a place behind them if you want it. You've had my back, and I promise I'll have yours too.*

*I love you.*

Tommy'” Techno let out a series of coughs that were a thinly veiled attempt to hide his own tears. “The not makin’ me cry rule applies to you, too, you know.”

“I refuse to apologize out of principle.”

Phil stared at his box for what felt like a long time before he opened it. He pulled out first a sage green jacket, one similar to the one Tommy knew he'd had before the fire. He held it up in shaking hands before gently setting it in his lap. He pulled out a spiral-bound book of index cards, which had handwritten detailed instructions on how to make every recipe Clem had ever called a ‘Family Recipe’ growing up.

“Not sure if all of those were actually family recipes or not but I didn't want to miss any just in case,” Tommy said sheepishly. Phil blinked owlshly at him, smiled, and pulled out his own letter. Like Wilbur, he read it to himself first, then cleared his throat.

“ ‘Dad,

*I almost wish I would have waited to call you that, just to give this letter a bit more meaning, you know? Make it a heartfelt moment instead of just me saying it while my brain-to-mouth filter was offline, but that feels more honest anyway.*

*I’ve always kept my heart close. Guarded. I don’t remember when you changed from Phil to Dad in my mind, but I know it was the best thing to ever happen to me. Well, second best.*

*The day I came home, I thought you were too happy, too soft, to deal with someone like me. And as that first day went on I thought, maybe I was wrong.*

*I thought you were just a good actor, maybe, because I could see the way you had to be strong and I didn’t believe someone who had seen so much unkindness could ever actually be a genuinely good person. It never occurred to me that the barrages of harshness life throws could ever erode away at someone’s sharp edges as they did to you. You chose to be defiant in a world that showed you unfairness and be fair, in a world that showed you violence to choose peace, and in a world that showed you hate to choose love.*

*You didn’t raise me. I grew up for seventeen years, lived for the better part of two decades, without ever knowing that that could be an option. That defiance didn’t always look like a clenched jaw and bruised knuckles, that sometimes it looks like a smile when there’s nothing to smile about, looks like trusting others to catch you even when you’ve been allowed to fall for too long, it looks like a man who believed he didn’t have a family to make his own anyway.*

*Strength always seemed physical, to me, but when I think of strength now I think of a tired man who took in an angry child, who took in a self-destructive teenager, who took in a soldier who was still stuck in the fight, and taught them that who they were isn’t who they had to be. You took them in and brought them home, solely because it was the right thing to do.*

*And when everything feels like it’s too much, when I feel lost or trapped, I know you’ll always be there, in front of me, to show me the way.*

*It's so bizarre to think of how much my life has changed in the last 8 months. So much has happened, so much has changed. It's a little terrifying. Sometimes I feel like a kid, like my legs aren't enough to support me, but I know you'll keep me standing.*

*Thank you, for supporting me, when I couldn't support myself.*

*You've done more than just care about me, which I always thought was an impossible feat, to begin with. You've taught me how to care about myself. How to see past my faults to the person I should have always been, and I am forever grateful.*

*You gave me so much more than just a roof over my head. You gave me a family, a home, and a sense of security I didn't know I needed. You gave me real, undeniable proof that people can be good.*

*I hope one day I'm half the man you are.*

*I love you,*

*Your Son. '''*

Phil sat the letter down, took a deep breath, and simply held his arms out toward Tommy. He took the hint and moved over to hug him, and Phil's face pressed into his hair. It felt like home.

# Chapter 38

## Chapter Summary

### Christmas Pt.2

## Chapter Notes

This one is super short but I wanted to get it out bc I'm working 4 extra hours of Over Time a day at work for the next week or so which puts me at like 12-13 hour shifts so I'm probably not going to be able to write a ton. ): I'll do my best to get the chapters out tho I promise

“My turn to give?” Phil asked with a smile, but Techno cleared his throat.

“I- actually- Tommy, did you open yours from me? I wanted to explain it a bit.” Tommy’s eyes widened, looking around the room.

“W-where is it? Oh god, did I lose it?” He panicked, freezing up. Phil glanced at the floor and reached forward and pulled the small bag from the pile of wrapping paper.

“Relax, mate, it’s right here.” Tommy took the bag with trembling hands. He nodded, pulling the bag open to reveal... a necklace? It had a golden chain, not unlike the ones Techno often wore, and embedded in an intricately wrapped wire pendant was a rough-cut green gemstone. Neither Wilbur nor Phil looked surprised at the jewelry, Wil fiddling with something under his shirt collar and Phil with a bracelet Tommy had never seen him without.

“I- it’s more symbolic than anything, I guess, real gold and it’s an actual emerald but I-” Techno huffed, looking embarrassed. “I- I’ve given one to Wilbur and Dad too, they’re... well, I got the stones on a trip I took ages ago, someone I had met told me they were special, that they were for love and safety, and she was probably just messing with me, trying to convince me to buy them... but I guess that’s sort of what they’ve come to mean anyway.

It's- a promise, I guess, that even when I don't show it, I'm always going to care, you know? That I've got your back. I- I guess you already knew that, since you said so, but I don't think a reminder is a bad thing..." Techno trailed off, staring intently at his feet.

"I- thank you, Tech. It means the world."

"Yeah?" Techno asked with a sheepish grin. "Sounds pretty sappy, nerd."

"You're the worst," Tommy laughed, clasping the necklace around his neck with a grin.

"Okay, now it's my turn," Phil interjected. "Wil, you first." Wilbur opened the gift with a grin, pulling from the box a pair of headphones, really, really nice headphones, actually. Then a mic, one that even Tommy knew would be better for recording than the one Wilbur had, which often was a little tinny and echoed in a way that made the room sound bigger than it was. Then he pulled out a map, which when unrolled had no country names, printed on linen and likely older than all of them in the room combined, if the borders that were marked were any indication. Wil beamed at Phil, who just nodded at him with a small smile. "Tech, your turn, go on." Techno was also handed just one box, which he opened just as carefully as he had the previous two. Inside were two things, a heavy, leather-bound book inlay with gold lettering, which Tommy would not be surprised if he were told it was real gold, because the book looked ancient, paper yellowed and stitching clearly done by hand. "It's not first edition, or anything, but it's still very old," Phil explained. Tommy looked closer and saw it was Shakespeare, a collection of plays. Techno hummed his appreciation, running a hand carefully over the cover. He very gently sat it down and pulled out the second thing, a glass inkwell and quill. It looked like the pen was made of brass, flared at the end to mimic a feather.

"These are amazing, Dad," Techno breathed, holding the pen in his hand.

"I'm glad you like them, son. Tommy, you know. Open the bigger one first." Phil handed him the two remaining boxes. Tommy opened the larger of the two boxes, carefully setting down the small one on the table next to him. Inside was a combination of things that made Tommy wonder if he was missing something. First, a polaroid camera and several boxes of film. He held them up with a grin, showing them to his brothers. Second, a much more detailed map than the one he'd given Wilbur, not unlike something you'd find in the glove box of a car just in case there wasn't cell phone service and you managed to get lost. Third was a journal, leatherbound and pristine, as well as a set of ink pens in a few colors. Tommy loved them, but

he was feeling a little confused about what they were for, really. He looked to Phil to ask, but Phil just gave him a mischievous grin and gestured to the smaller box. Tommy huffed out a laugh and opened it as well. The box was light, couldn't have weighed more than a few ounces really, and when he pulled off the top there was nothing but a key inside. It wasn't a house key, certainly, and Tommy wasn't really sure what *it* was for either.

"I- I'm sorry, I don't think I understand?" Tommy whispered. "I- they're great, but-"

"Boys, I think we should take a quick trip outside, don't you?" Wilbur and Techno were both grinning too, nodding and standing. Tommy huffed out a bemused laugh and followed them to the front door, slipping on his shoes and following them outside.

And there, sitting in the driveway, was a dark blue van Tommy had never seen before. It was one that probably only had two seats, where the back would be mostly open to allow for carrying furniture or other miscellaneous items. Phil was moving toward it, so Tommy followed, still feeling just as confused.

"He hasn't gotten it yet," Wilbur snickered, elbowing Techno and gesturing over to Tommy.

"Got *what*?" Tommy whined, crossing his arms.

"Well, we thought, since you wanted to travel," Phil said while opening the back doors to the van, "This might be a little easier than having to rent a hotel everywhere you go." The doors swung open to reveal the interior of the van had been converted to what was essentially a tiny home. There was a frame folded against one side that Tommy could tell folded down into a bed, shelving on one side that housed a few simple appliances, a microwave and electric kettle, and plenty of storage space. Tommy could see the wiring that ran to solar panels on the roof. "Well?"

"It- this is for me?" Tommy choked out.

"Course it is, what, do you think I plan on roaming around the country any time soon?" Phil laughed. "We know you want to travel, want to explore the world on your own, and it only seemed right that we help you do that. I figured you'd want a way to keep track of where

you'd been, hence the camera and journal, and well, the GPS is programmed to always find the fastest route home, so you'll never have to worry about finding your way."

"*Dad,*" Tommy cried, falling into his arms. He thought of what Wil told him, that family was 'Somewhere to come back to.' He was sure, now, that he was right.

"Hey! We helped too! You think the old man built those shelves himself?" Wilbur teased. Tommy pulled away from Phil and tackled Wilbur, hugging him just as fiercely.

"Thank you, all of you, seriously, I-" Tommy cut himself off with a laugh. He let go of Wil and hugged Techno too, then he just stared at them with watery eyes and a quivering smile.

"There's one more thing. Not really a gift, but, well," Phil shrugged, holding out a sheet of paper. "The old property sold." And Tommy was holding a check for 20,000 dollars.

"I gave you less than this," Tommy protested.

"Eh, we'll call it interest." Tommy tried to argue, but Techno wrapped a hand around his shoulders and gave him a look that clearly said 'you aren't gonna win this one, kid' so Tommy bit back his exasperation and laughed.

"Fine, fine, whatever. Can we go inside? I'm freezing."



# Chapter 39

## Chapter Summary

Winter gives way to Spring

## Chapter Notes

I made a sassy author's note yelling at someone who was being mean about a video not considering that the creator I was talking about in said video would see it and my partner laughed at me because I was embarrassed. Hi, TikTok user who was very nice to me my hits jumped exponentially after your video so thank you if you are okay with me mentioning your TikTok username I am very willing to do so. Anyway- I said I wouldn't update but I lied so have this. We officially hit 100k words.

I dunno if y'all know this but I've only ever written poetry and like a few 4k word short stories for a creative writing class, this is my first actual attempt at writing in proper so this is fucking insane. S/o to my husband who writes for me sometimes and gave me lots of advice on how to do this shit.

All things considered, learning to drive was going incredibly well. Techno was shockingly patient, gently correcting Tommy's mistakes with explanations that made a lot of sense. They were in his car since Tommy still took turns wide and neither of them was quite convinced he'd be comfortable in the van yet, chatting idly about mostly nothing, when Techno's face suddenly contorted into a look of frustration.

"Uh, you okay?" Tommy asked, glancing over at him.

"I'm okay, I just wanted to talk to you about something and I haven't figured out a good way to bring it up."

"Well, no time like the present, big man. What's up?"

“I’m going to ask you this and you’re going to feel super awkward and unsure of how to answer,” Techno started, “but... Wil and I have talked about it a few times and realized we have no idea either way, so uh... what are your plans after you graduate?”

“Er- elaborate,” Tommy asked, not looking away from the road.

“Like... I mean you’re still planning on traveling.”

“That wasn’t really a question, but yeah, I am.”

“But are you, uh, going to come back? Or stay in touch? Before you always said no before but...” Tommy grimaced.

“I don’t really have an answer,” he admitted. “I- things have changed a lot, and that’s a good thing! Really! But I’ve always had a plan, you know? To skip town and leave everything but myself behind when I go. I think now, even if I were to leave, some part of me would stay here, stay home, and I don’t know if I could ever really be gone, I guess. The thought of leaving and never coming back sounds terrible, but I don’t know if I can stay, either. Does that make sense?”

“But why? Why couldn’t you stay? Take a gap year to explore and then go to Uni and hang around? What’s stopping you?”

“When... when I was a kid, more than I am now, a *young* kid, I wanted that. I wanted a place to settle down, a place to come back to, I guess, but as I got older and things changed I gave up on it ever happening. I have a family now, which is insane because I was so sure I was unlovable, some toxic pit of a person who would only ever drag others down with me, and there are days I still feel like that,” Tommy sighed. “I know it sounds irrational, that it is irrational, but I promised myself that I would go out and conquer the world, you know? Figure myself out and become more than what I was. It feels like I’d be letting young me down by not doing that now.”

“I guess I get that. I- Phil adopted me young, and Wil, too, we were both, y’know, *kids* still when we came home, so I guess we didn’t have the time to turn bitter yet. Wilbur was pretty

disillusioned with the idea of a family at first, but it went away pretty quickly, and he settled in, but I remember seeing the older kids who were close to aging out, and none of them had any sort of hope of finding a family. It's weird to think about, because when I see you, all I can see is my brother, you know? But I've really only ever known you as that, when Phil took you in it was so *obvious* to us that you belonged there, but I guess for you it would have been different. At first, it must have just seemed like the same old song and dance you'd been doing for years, and even though now you see us as family, you still have this other perception of us as just another set of strangers who could be anyone."

"Yeah, exactly. You're my family, and I know that, logically, I would always have a place if I asked for it, but at the same time it's like I'm fighting with these two world views that directly contradict each other, where one says I am still just another foster kid the system failed and the other says I'm a success story that proves family comes whether you expect it or not."

"Would it help, if you were adopted? Dad still has the paperwork."

"No. No, I don't think it would," Tommy says softly. "A piece of paper doesn't change anything, even if it seems like it should. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't want to be a part of the family- it's just--"

"It's just that you already are, and having to file paperwork to prove it seems like bullshit," Techno guessed.

"Exactly. Family isn't... it has nothing to do with last names or paperwork or blood. And saying 'oh, we'll make it official!' By signing a bunch of documents feels like it completely dismisses that. I know Dad wants it, has wanted it for ages, but... I think if he offered them again it would just... hurt. Like he didn't think everything we went through together was enough. I think I'd still say no."

"He isn't going to ask again. Wil mentioned giving you the papers again for Christmas and Dad said he wouldn't, because the papers wouldn't change anything anyway and he didn't want you to feel pressured to say yes."

"Phil... he's a really great guy, you know? He's everything I hope to be someday. I'm worried that my leaving might actually break his heart, even though he went through all the

trouble to make my leaving as good as possible for me, I know he wants me to stay.” Tommy pulls the car into the driveway. “He’d never say it to me, but I’ve heard him talking about it to you and Wil before, and I know he’s worried that if I’m alone I’ll... lose the progress I’ve made. I’m a little afraid that he might be right.”

“Do you want comfort or do you want advice?” Techno asked genuinely.

“Both, maybe?”

“Okay. First, I think whichever you choose to do, things are going to be okay. You’re a strong and smart kid, and you’re likable enough that wherever you end up I think there’s going to be someone in your corner. Secondly, Dad is going to worry whether you’re here or there, so I think you should just choose what’s going to be best for *you*, and don’t worry about how it’s going to affect us. And if it ever gets bad... well, we’re all just a phone call away.”

“You say that but you’re worried too, aren’t you?”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Tommy, I’m terrified. We’ve had plenty of kids come through and leave, but it’s different with you, I guess.”

“It’s because we’re trauma-bonded,” Tommy replies, and Techno snorts. Tommy shoves him playfully. “Don’t laugh at me! I’m serious! If I just showed up and hung around being boring for 14 months you three would have been fine with me leaving. The reason we got close at all is that we went through like 14 catastrophic events in 8 months.”

“14 is pushing it,” Techno replied flatly.

“Let’s go through the list, shall we? I have that panic attack where you get freaked out when I pull myself out of it, I have a war flashback, you think I’m starving myself, I think Phil cracked Wil over the head with a textbook, Wil and I fight, the house burns down, I almost die, I start dissociating like three times a week, you find out about the shit I’ve gone through in a way that freaks you out, you find out I think you’re starving me, I call George, Margaret, I go to that party, I try to play Icarus-”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Also, half of those could probably be combined down into single events.”

“Could they? I feel like I have to talk about them individually in therapy,” Tommy teases.

“Okay, *fair*. Also, I can’t believe you’ve only been here since April, it feels like you’ve been here for ages.”

“Yeah, the trauma really warps your perception of time,” Tommy deadpans.

“I’ll show you trauma-” Techno threatens, diving for Tommy across the center console. Tommy laughs loudly and jumps out of the car before bolting into the house. He knows Techno is on his heels, but he still freezes right inside the doorway anyway, because Wil is *crying*. Techno slams into Tommy’s back, but Tommy barely reacts, just shushing Techno and pointing upstairs, where Wil’s conversation can only faintly be heard.

“I just don’t know what to do! It feels like we’re just giving up on him!” Wilbur cries, clearly talking on the phone. There’s a pause and he continues, “I *know* that, but he’s just a kid, he’s only going to be 18! If I told Dad when I was 18 that I was going to go wander the country he would have chained me to my bed!” another pause, longer this time. “Who cares? He can be as mature as he wants, he’s still a traumatized kid with a potential death wish! Dad and Tech both think it’s going to be good for him or something but how am I the only one who thinks it’s an *awful* idea? He’ll be all alone!” Tommy grimaces, glancing at Techno, whose expression is completely unreadable. “Yeah, I’ll be ready in five. See you then.” Wilbur must’ve hung up then, because the talking stops. Techno closes the front door, a little louder than is absolutely necessary, and Wilbur’s door creaks open, to reveal him half-dressed and red-faced. “Hey, guys! How did the drive go?”

“Uh, yeah it went well. Tommy still can’t stay in his lane in left turns, though,” Techno laughed, clearly trying and failing to act nonchalant.

“Oh, well, I’m sure you’ll get it, Toms. I’m heading out with Eret and Schlatt and Nikki in a few.”

“You’re not going to be drinking, are you? Should I start writing my will in case you break a guitar string again?” Tommy teases, but Techno clearly picks up on his just barely bitter tone.

“If we do drink it’ll just be a little bit. No house fires in our future, don’t worry.”

“Wil,” Tommy groans. “You shouldn’t be drinking.”

“Well, neither should you!”

“Yeah, we covered that already. Had a whole depression arc and everything,” Tommy replied flatly. “Seriously man, I don’t know why you do this to yourself.”

“I’m just going out to spend time with some friends and Schlatt, it’ll be fine.”

“Whatever man, just don’t expect me to walk you home at 3 AM again.” Wilbur rolls his eyes and goes back into his room. The atmosphere is tense between Techno and Tommy.

“You okay?” Techno finally asks quietly.

“I’ll be fine, yeah. Just worried about him, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

---

Tommy doesn’t like to admit when he’s feeling particularly anxious, and really he didn’t think Wil going out to relax with a few friends would ever be a *trigger* for him, but when Wil stumbles into the house at midnight smelling of cheap beer and cigarettes and wood smoke, something in his throat tightens. He’s going through the motions, getting Wil water and

painkillers, walking him up the stairs, making sure he brushes his teeth and gets to bed, but his hands are trembling and he feels like he's watching his own panic play out in third-person. He knows he brushes his own teeth, but when he watches himself do it in the mirror it's like he's staring at a stranger. The smell of smoke lingers in his mind and phantom pains shoot through his body like he's burning all over again. He makes it to his room just fine and he's still sitting awake when Techno checks on him four hours later.

"Tommy? Why are you awake?"

"You're awake too," Tommy mumbles, his voice feeling distant.

"Yeah but I just woke up and I'm going to go back to bed. You don't look like you've slept."

"I haven't," Tommy admits. "I'm worried. Dissociating a little."

"Is it because of Wil?"

"He smelled like smoke when he got home. I just- I don't know, it just feels a little too familiar, I guess. I thought I was over the fire, I can joke about it and everything, we all do, all the time, but- I don't know. It scared me, *scares* me, to think about. It was awful, it hurt, still hurts, and I know there's no chance of it happening again but some part of my stupid brain is telling me that it's going to lead to another fight and we're gonna end up right where we started."

"Tommy the situation is entirely different," Techno sighs.

"Is it? Wil goes out with friends, comes home drunk, I'm frustrated with him for drinking, he's going to wake up in a mood, there's some unresolved conflict that's going to be used as ammunition when we inevitably fight, people's feelings are going to get hurt," Techno cuts him off.

"If it becomes a fight we'll- me and Dad- will put a stop to it before it gets to that point."

“I mean, you’ve never been able to do that before. Couldn’t when it happened the first time, couldn’t stop it when it was me and Phil fighting, or when it was me and you fighting. We just fought and screamed and yelled until someone snapped and then something bad happened because I’m *awful* at conflict resolution and get all defensive and shit when someone starts yelling.”

“I- okay, but there have been plenty of fights between all of us that ended fine. You and Wil fight like three times a week.”

“But not over serious shit! We push each other's buttons but we don't fight in any way that's actually meaningful.”

“What about that fight where Wil was having a bad day? Nothing bad happened then, and it was a pretty big fight.”

“I punched Purpled in the face and passed out from a panic attack,” Tommy scoffed.

“That wasn't right after the fight though, that was later.”

“Later by like a few days,” Tommy argued. “I think it counts.”

“I mean, I guess,” Techno shrugged. “I’ll annoy him this time so you don’t have to, if you want.”

“Oh good, we can both be miserable instead of just one of us. Pog.”

“Exactly! That’s the spirit!” Techno teased. Tommy rolled his eyes and smiled.

“Thanks, Tech.”



“Any time! Now get some sleep.”

“Sure, sure.”

—

The morning brought several things, but the most concerning to Tommy was the utter silence. He knew it was still early, but he was sure that by now at the very least Phil would be up, but it was like nothing was even alive. Tommy groaned and moved out of his room, confused to see Wilbur's door hanging open. He made his way downstairs and found all three other household members sitting in complete silence at the kitchen table.

“Uhhh, mornin’,” Tommy whispered, looking to Techno in confusion. Techno just shrugged and jerked his head toward Wil, who was shaking violently and staring into what *had* to be coffee. “Wil, why the hell are you drinking that shit, it’s going to make it worse.” Tommy scoffed, already heading toward the kitchen to make him something without caffeine.

“I wanted it,” Wilbur replied sharply, his voice raspy like he had yet to speak that day. Based on the surprised faces of Phil and Tech, he probably *hadn’t* spoken, actually. Tommy rolled his eyes and finished pouring him a mug of tea, bless Techno for keeping the kettle on for the first six hours of the day, and sat the drink in front of him.

“Too bad, caffeine is for people who aren’t twitchy.”

“Shut up,” Wilbur hissed but took the tea anyway. Tommy shook his head and moved to sit down in his usual seat.

“You’re welcome.”

“Tommy, mate, maybe don’t antagonize your brother right now,” Phil sighed.

“I do as I please, thank you.”

“Tommy.”

“Fine. Sorry, Wil.”

“Thanks. It’s okay,” He mumbled, sipping the drink. Tommy glanced at him, eyes narrowing at the tension in his posture and the way he was obviously trying to keep his breathing even, and failing. He contemplated it for a second then started tapping on the table. Just an even tempo, once per second. He’d let Will count it himself if he so chose. They sat like that, the only noise being the steady clicking of nails on wood, for another twenty minutes before Wilbur let out a half-laugh.

“You can stop counting now, I’m alright.” Phil and Techno both looked confused.

“Nobody’s counting,” Techno said incredulously.

“Tommy is, he’s been tapping out my breathing since he sat down.”

“Technically I wasn’t counting, just tapping. You counted it yourself,” Tommy shrugged. Wil looked thoughtful for a second.

“Is that how you learned?”

“No. But that’s a much nicer way of learning it than I did.”

“How did you learn?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Tommy shrugged. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. The tea helped.”

“Right, but how are you feeling?”

“I honestly don’t feel too bad. Mostly just nauseous.” Tommy nodded and left it at that.

---

Winter was quickly giving away to spring. Tommy focused more and more on finishing school while his friends were focusing on acceptance letters, which had started coming in from many of the universities they’d applied to.

Tubbo and Ranboo had both been accepted to their first-choice school, which they were planning on attending together, roughly three hours away from home. They’d tried and failed to get Tommy to apply as well, stating his grades alone would practically guarantee his acceptance, but Tommy turned them down, stating that if he so wanted he would just find an apartment in a town near the school so they could be close by. He didn’t plan on actually doing so, but it was enough to satisfy his friends and it wasn’t really a lie if he didn’t actually say he would do it.

Phil started mentioning Uni too, as the letters from them started pouring in, offering Tommy late application options for the fall semester. Tommy brushed off the conversations, resolute in his decision to not attend, and often he found his dad staring sadly at the stacks of letters that were rapidly piling up in the garbage bin. Tommy got his license in early February, and the freedom of being able to go anywhere weighed heavily on his family’s minds. Too often Tommy would vanish for the weekend, claiming to need some ‘fresh air’. Puffy called it intentional isolation, told Tommy it seemed like he was purposefully alienating himself from his family, but Tommy swore it was just him calming his restless spirit.

Secretly, Tommy wondered if she was right. He wondered if it was his way of estranging his family before he left for real. The first few weekends, nothing more than short trips to close by tourist towns and campsites, Tommy missed his brothers terribly, missed the house and his

dad so much it made him feel sick, but by late March, he found it almost exhilarating to lay in the grass and stare at the stars alone. He found himself thinking more and more of Clementine as his 18th birthday approached, wondering if she would come back for him like she'd said. He doubted she'd want to hang around for two months while he finished school, and it had been nearly four years since he'd seen or heard from her, so it was almost more likely that she'd moved past him. She was always more of a free spirit than Tommy, even though his soul ached for adventure, hers often screamed for more. She always wanted to go further and further, never wanting to double back, always going forward. Tommy admired that as a kid, now he wasn't so sure. He thought that maybe, coming home after a time away was the best part of the trip.

# Chapter 40

## Chapter Summary

Growing up

## Chapter Notes

Y'all we're so close to the last chapter of Nights like these. I'm gonna cry.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He woke on the morning of his 18th birthday to the smell of breakfast and the sound of Wilbur's sing-song voice telling him to get up. He groaned in annoyance and pulled himself from the sheets, stumbling to the door and swinging it open to glare at his brother.

"You look *terrible* !" Wilbur giggled. "Too excited to sleep?"

"Wha' 'm I excited f'r?" Tommy mumbled, rubbing his eyes and leaning against the door frame.

"Your... birthday?" Wilbur replied, baffled.

"My birthd'y is on the 9th."

"Yes, Toms, very good. And what is today?"

"Saturday."

“Saturday the what?” Tommy looked confused for a solid thirty seconds, then realization dawned on his face.

“Wait, is it my birthday?”

“Welcome to the land of the living, bud.”

“Oh, oh holy shit! I’m 18!” Tommy looked significantly less asleep.

“Breakfast, gremlin child, c’mon.”

“You can’t call me a child! I’m literally a whole man now!”

“Toms you’re wearing pajama pants with butterflies on them.”

“They’re moths. Also, fuck you.” They were a gag gift from Tubbo, and Tommy pretended to hate them, but he was actually pretty fond.

“C’mon!” Wilbur whined, pulling on Tommy’s arm. Tommy just sighed and followed him down the stairs. Phil and Techno were both at the table, plates in front of them but not eating.

“Good morning, Tommy! Happy birthday!” Phil cheered, giving him a big smile.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Birth,” Techno said flatly, just the slightest hint of a smirk on his face.

“Thank,” Tommy replied seriously, trying his best to keep the grin off his own face.

“W-was that a conversation?” Phil asked, bewildered. Wilbur also looked confused.

“Yes, a very serious and heartfelt one, couldn’t you tell?” Tommy teased, flopping down into his chair.

“I... you’re all adults and somehow you’re still toddlers.” Tommy beamed.

“We *are* all adults, aren’t we? Big man breakfast time.”

“Oh god, you’re going to be insufferable today, aren’t you?” Techno snickered, piling pancakes onto Tommy’s plate and handing it to him.

“No more than usual,” Tommy shrugged, quietly continuing, “I’m just in a good mood right now.”

“Wait I was teasing, you can be excited for your birthday,” Techno quickly assured.

“I know you were teasing, man. Don’t worry.” Tommy smiled. “It’s just... really wild, y’know? 18. It almost feels fake.”

“Well, it’s not official until presents!” Wilbur chimed in, grinning.

“Hey! I told you no presents!” Tommy whined. “I don’t want to celebrate it more than this.” Wilbur just laughed and pulled two boxes from beneath the table.

“Don’t worry, they’re from all of us and not big things.” Tommy pouted a little before taking them.

“Is there an order to open these or does it matter?”

“Nope! Just open them!” Tommy started opening the first box. It was wrapped in thick craft paper, and the box inside was plain white. He gave them a suspicious look when opening it and was met with...

“Is... is this an *iPod Shuffle*? Do they even still make these?”

“They do not! It’s vintage!”

“Guys, what the fuck?”

“It’s full of songs!”

“Yes, I know how iPods work, Wil,” Tommy laughed, and started flipping through the songs. Most of them he’d never heard of. “I actually had one when I first moved in. I’m just confused.”

“It’s full of our favorite songs! A little bit of us when you’re away!” Tommy let out a bewildered laugh.

“I think a Spotify playlist would have worked just as well, but sure. Thank you.” Tommy was teasing, he actually really enjoyed the idea of having a physical item that was essentially his family baring their souls. He reached for the second box, raising an eyebrow when he realized it was actually a book. He pulled it from the paper and the front had a pretty font that said ‘Memories’. He snorted and opened it to see it was photos. Most notably, photos of Tommy, several of which were taken before he was taken in by Phil. “Oh my god did Ma give you these?” Phil laughed.



“Just some of the first ones, don’t worry.” The first picture was taken in Margaret’s front yard. Tommy was laying in the grass, the neighbors’ dog laying on his chest, and he looked mildly annoyed and tired. That had been taken only a day or two after he moved in with her. One of Tommy with a washrag on his head laying on Margaret’s couch, he had gotten sick and she insisted on him staying in the living room. He didn’t know they’d taken that one. One of him at Evan’s soccer game, screaming and obviously thrilled at whatever was happening on the field. He flipped through, another caught his eye, Tommy fresh off a paddleboat, Evan had forced him to do it, Tommy looking seasick but with a half-grin on his face. Then there was one of him sitting in the hallway of the first house with Phil, him looking thoughtful while Wil played guitar, taken from the bottom of the stairs. One of Tommy scrubbing the kitchen floors, flipping off the camera with a look of annoyance that was so obviously fake it was nearly comical. One of Nikki and him making cake, Tommy had flour in his hair. One of him in the music shop, Fundy looking exhausted and Tommy balancing empty record sleeves on his head.

One of him in a wheelchair after the fire, wrapped like a mummy and dazed out of his mind arguing with a doctor. He was pretty sure he was trying to convince the doctor to let him try taking the wheelchair down the stairs. One where Tommy was in his bed, still bandaged, animatedly arguing with Schlatt while laying on Ranboo. Tommy in Wilbur’s bed, half-buried in blankets while Techno sat there complaining about something. Tommy, Wilbur, and Techno laying in a tangle of limbs on the couch. Tommy with Tubbo on his shoulders, flowers being braided into his hair. Tommy, Ranboo, and Eret in matching, horrifically ugly, shirts from a thrift shop. Tommy and Dream sitting on the top railing of the town bridge, twenty-some-odd feet above the photographer. One of him with Techno, mid snowball hitting his face. Several from Christmas. Him in the driver’s seat of Techno’s car looking panicked. One of him pulling back into the driveway laughing while Techno looked nauseous from the passenger seat.

Him with his driver’s license, grinning widely. Him washing the van, covered in soap bubbles, and threatening the camera with the hose. Him cooking something, not looking at the camera at all but with a soft smile on his face. Him holding Phil’s hat just out of Phil’s reach, Phil looking exhausted but laughing. Tommy *wearing* Phil’s hat. Tommy talking Techno through homework at the kitchen table. Tommy talking on the phone looking like he was trying to hold back laughter on the back porch.

“What... what is this?” Tommy asked quietly.

“Those, dear brother, are irrefutable proof that things have gotten better,” Wilbur said with a smile.

“What do you mean?” Techno reached over and flipped back to the first page again.

“Look at you in these photos. Look how tense and uncomfortable you look in them, even in the ones where you’re having a good time. Then look at the last photos. Totally relaxed, *actually* smiling, comfortable. They’re proof that even if you can’t see it, you’ve made progress, you’ve healed at least a little bit. We know you worry that you haven’t.”

“ *Oh,* ” Tommy whispered. “Okay.”

“Crying, Toms?”

“I will skin you alive,” Tommy threatened, ineffectively since he *was* crying. “This is just... it’s nice. I- why do you guys keep doing this?”

“Doing what?” Phil asked.

“You keep giving me gifts for when I go, even though you don’t want me to leave and you don’t have any idea if I’m coming back,” Tommy said quietly.

“Because you *want* to go, and if you stay gone we know you’d be doing what’s best for *you* . Our opinions are irrelevant, because you need to do what makes you happy.” Tommy sighed, nodding.

“Thank you.”

“Of course, kiddo.”

—

Tommy's birthday barreled on with little fanfare, Tubbo and Ranboo showing up later in the afternoon to hang out, and Nikki bringing cupcakes. The most shocking thing to Tommy was the mail. Four cards, four more than he'd ever gotten, had arrived. The first from Margaret, a general well-wishing and a demand to meet up for lunch soon, one from George, congratulations on turning 18 and a promise to go through the final paperwork soon to get his technical 'aging out' paperwork done, one from Deo and Emma that was basically a thinly veiled threat that if he didn't visit the diner soon they were going to beat him up, which was *insane*, since it had been less than a week since his last visit, and one with no return address but painfully familiar handwriting that said, *'Finding your address was a nightmare. See you soon. -C'* Tommy was pretty sure he was about to cry, just from the idea of her remembering his birthday after so many years. He half expected her to appear that day, but other than some of his brother's friends, that he refused to claim as his own on principle, thank you, nobody else showed. As the day turned to night, Tommy lost hope in her arriving for his birthday and instead assumed she'd show up soon to try to drag him away into whatever chaos she had gotten herself into.

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April continued, Tommy suffering through a second celebration for his year anniversary of being with his family, which felt like much more of a shock than his birthday, and it gave way to May.

"Why are you sitting out here all alone?" Wilbur asked from the back door. Tommy was lounging on the porch, watching the late evening sun dip lower and lower toward the horizon.

"Just thinking, I guess. Finals are stressing me out and I needed a break. Wanna join?" Wilbur sat down gracelessly, immediately laying back against the wood of the porch and laying his feet in Tommy's lap. "Sure, I guess I'll be your footrest."

"How are you feeling? More than a year, now."

"I mean, honestly? I'm not sure. This has been somehow both the longest and fastest year of my life," Tommy admitted. "I'm a little freaked out about the idea of being out of school, the idea of leaving home. It's kinda weird to think that I've got less than a month before I'm expected to know what to do with my life, you know?"

“You could always stay, you know,” Wilbur suggested, but it felt more like an offhand comment than a genuine one. Tommy still shrugged.

“Yeah, I guess so. I don’t know. I’m legally not your problem anymore and that’s bringing up a whole slew of anxieties I didn’t realize I still had.”

“Yeah, I had ‘em too when I hit 18, and I was legally adopted. I can’t imagine what it feels like to not have the paperwork proving I belong here.”

“You’re still upset that I didn’t agree to the adoption.” It wasn’t a question.

“A little, I guess. I don’t understand why you were still so against it even after everything.”

“Wil.”

“I mean, it was your choice, and I’m not going to be a dick about it, I just don’t get it.”

“Yeah, I know you don’t. It’s complicated.” Wilbur nodded.

“What else has you bothered? Usually, when it’s school stress you come to get me or Tech or Dad.”

“Clementine, actually. She sent me a birthday card saying she’d see me soon.”

“So? I’d think you’d be glad to hear from her.”

“I was when I got it. But... I’m also a little scared. I loved her, don’t get me wrong, but I have no clue how she’s going to react to you three or how she’s going to react to me. Four

years is a long time, there's no telling how we've changed. I'm not sure what scares me more, the idea of us both being totally different or us being exactly the same."

"Well, you definitely aren't the same kid who showed up last year."

"Aren't I, though? Still the same bad attitude and mother henning, still the same crude jokes and overthinking."

"Yeah, but you showed up a scared and traumatized kid with the sky on his shoulders, now you're a scared traumatized adult with people there to help bear the weight."

"Jesus Christ, you spend too much time with Techno, why are you making mythology metaphors?" Wilbur just laughed in response. "But... I don't know. I want her to be happy for me, but I'm worried she'll be upset that I went and found a family instead."

"She cared about you, obviously still does, I think she'll be relieved you aren't alone and miserable if anything."

"Maybe."

Tommy's fears were by no means settled, but they were at the very least pushed aside as finals came, spending all of his free time studying with Tubbo and Ranboo, trying to cram 12 years of knowledge in their brains to the point they barely knew anything else. The amount of caffeine consumed daily between the three of them was probably enough to kill an elephant.

But the day of their first finals, Tommy found their panic was for nothing. The tests went by quickly, and while they were long, they really weren't exceptionally difficult. His friends all echoed his sentiment at lunch, agreeing that they had been hyped up so much that the actual tests were almost underwhelming. The rest of the week followed suit, and then they were done. They were cleaning out their lockers and turning in their textbooks and clearing their lunch accounts, and then they were leaving the building for the last time.

“We... we did it,” Ranboo laughed. “We’re done.”

“We’re done!” Tubbo cheered.

“We’re done,” Tommy whispered, glancing back at the school. “I can’t believe it.”

—

Graduation was loud. Full of screaming teenagers who were crying and laughing and excited and Tommy was *miserable*. He woke up already on edge and he was pretty sure the crowded room and constant noise were sending him barreling toward a breakdown. People he’d never spoken more than 10 words to were hugging him and talking about how much they’d *miss* him, which was insane because he didn’t know more than half their names. He was sticking close to Tubbo, who thankfully was quite close to him in the alphabetical order they had to stand in. Even with his best friend only a few feet away, it felt like too much. Finally, they filed one by one to their seats, and after a grueling speech that lasted far too long, the names were finally called. One by one his classmates were given their diplomas, shook the hands of several administrators, and sat back down. When his name was called, he barely heard the cheers in the crowd over his own heartbeat. He briefly wondered if he would pass out halfway through the walk, but then he was sitting again, and the next person was on stage. Then it was over, another speech was given, they moved their tassels, threw their hats, and were dispersed into the crowd. Families swarmed, hugging and taking photos and every one of them bumping into Tommy made his throat feel tighter and tighter. Despite being taller than the majority of the class, and Wilbur also being exceptionally tall, he couldn’t find them. He knew they were here, surely they wouldn’t miss his *graduation*, right? He heard someone call his name, not really recognizing the voice much but hoping it was someone he knew.

As he turned his head to follow the sound, someone’s hand clapped down on his shoulder, and he froze. Maybe it was just the idea that someone had gotten that close to him with no warning, maybe it was just how overwhelming everything was, but he felt his breath catch and he was spiraling, unable to hear whatever the person who was touching him was *saying* over how focused he was on the feeling of their hand on his shoulder. He did notice someone else move into his space, though, moving so they were in sight but not looking at him so much as they were glaring at whoever was behind him. It took him nearly ten seconds to process that he knew her, and really it didn’t actually click until she spoke, even and clearly angry,

“If you intend on keeping that hand attached to your body, I suggest you remove it from his.” There was no room for argument. Her glare was still just as intimidating as it was when they were kids, shoulders squared and looking furious, but the hand did not move for another ten seconds then it let go. “Are you okay, Tommy?”

“C-Clem?” He choked out, his voice raspy and his heart still beating far too fast. The person behind him moved forward again, but whatever their intention was it didn’t matter because Clementine was not having it. Just like he was 13 again, she stepped forward, and in movements far too fast for his brain to actually process there was the sound of someone getting hit, and then she was back in front of him, both of them now several steps away from whoever she’d just punched.

“Okay, T. I’m taking your wrists now, we’re going to kneel down, yeah?” Tommy didn’t argue and was gently guided to the ground. “Three of them, bleeding one’s about five feet to your six, brunette almost eight feet away to your seven, pink-haired right next to them. I’m going to move back now, two feet to your twelve. Start counting.” Tommy nodded, taking a deep breath and tapping out the pattern to get himself calm. Pink hair. He knew someone with pink hair. He wasn’t thinking super clearly, so he was struggling to figure out why the idea of them behind him was pinging *something* in his mind. He didn’t actually figure out why until one of them started speaking and Clem stood up to threaten them. He knew that voice, he *knew that voice*, he-

“What the hell is wrong with you, why did you hit him!?” *Wilbur*.

“I’ll fuckin’ hit you too if you don’t back up, Who just fucking grabs someone with no warning you dumba-” Tommy stood and spun to see his family, Phil holding his nose which was gushing blood, and Wilbur in Clementine’s face. He saw her fists clench and she took a half step back when Wilbur started to yell back, obviously reeling back to swing again.

“Not a threat! Not- Clem, *no*. ”

----

Wilbur was *furious*. He wasn’t actually sure what happened, he and Tech were approaching Tommy and Phil and suddenly some blonde girl was actively trying to break Phil’s nose, then dragging Tommy to his knees and talking very quietly to him. He froze for a second, looking

between them before Techno moved towards Phil, so Wilbur went toward Tommy, and suddenly the girl was in his face. Had he taken a second to actually look at her, he would probably have kept his mouth closed, but his temper flared at the sight of two of his family members hurt and he blurted out

“What the hell is wrong with you, why did you hit him!?”

“I’ll fuckin’ hit you too if you don’t back up, Who just fucking grabs someone with no warning you dumba-” Wilbur took a step forward, glaring right back at her, about to threaten her, which is when he noticed three things. One, she had absolute fury in her eyes, two, she was definitely about to hit him, and three, he had no fucking chance of getting out of this. He didn’t notice Tommy move until he was gasping out,

“Not a threat! Not- Clem, *no*. ” Wilbur could have laughed if he wasn’t so sure he was about to be knocked out. If this was Clementine, the hardened trigger-happy short-fused sister who had raised Tommy into a fucking *soldier*, he was pretty sure she wasn’t going to take his word for them not being a threat. But, to his complete disbelief, she *immediately* backed down, taking a full step back. “That’s my family, they weren’t going to hurt me. I was just freaking out.” Tommy had moved forward, now at her side, and really, Wil wasn’t sure how he hadn’t noticed earlier. Even without the fact that she looked just like Dad, every mannerism she’d displayed was so identical to the way *Tommy* reacted in high-stress situations that it was uncanny.

“Okay, T. I trust your judgment.” She glanced over at Phil. “All of them are yours?”

“Yes. You punched my Dad.” Clementine scrunched up her nose, looking guilty, like she was a toddler who was being scolded, which was *insane* , because it was *Tommy* speaking to her. Tommy, who was barely 18 and from what Wilbur knew was essentially her baby brother, but she obviously didn’t see him as a kid, she saw him as an equal, at least enough to follow his lead when she didn’t have all the information for. “Apologize.” Tommy was clearly not asking. She nodded, then looked to Wilbur.

“I am genuinely sorry, I misread the situation, obviously. All I saw was someone grab Tommy and him panicking, it didn’t occur to me that they weren’t intrinsically linked.”



“I- it’s okay?” Wilbur replied, flabbergasted. Clementine gave him a tight smile and her eyes snapped to Phil, who was now pinching his nose and leaning his head back.

“Oi! What the hell are you doing?” She moved toward him, completely ignoring Techno. “Don’t do that, you- I’m going to touch you.” She didn’t wait for a response before she tilted Phi’s head down and moved where he was pinching his nose. “Tilting your head back like that is how you end up with blood in your lungs, dumbass. Hold it here to stem the bleeding, Jesus have you never had a bloody nose before?” She let go of Phil and took a step back, shaking her head. “Have you taught them nothing, T? Forgot all the first-aid we worked so hard to learn?”

“It hasn’t come up before now. And no, I haven’t, pretty sure I’ll never get that shit out of my head,” Tommy snapped. “You okay, Wil?” Wilbur nodded without looking at him, eyes still fixed on his father and... cousin? She was digging in her bag and pulled out a packet of tissues.

“Here, Mr. Tommy’s dad, the bleeding should be slowed down or stopped by now, take this.” Phil reached out, taking the tissue.

“T-thanks,” He muttered, letting go of his nose and wiping his face. “Jesus, you hit like a damn truck.” Clementine snorted, and again Wilbur was struck with just how *alike* she and Tommy were.

“I didn’t hit you that hard, but... I am sorry, I-“

“Yeah, I heard your-“ Phil waved vaguely at Wil. “-conversation. All forgiven.” Clementine nodded, even though Phil wasn’t looking at her.

“I didn’t break it, right? I can set it if you-“ Phil looked up, and the second their eyes met Clementine’s voice died off.

“Okay, before you freak out, had you not decked him I was going to tell you before you two met,” Tommy explained, moving next to her. “Three steps off on your nine.” Tommy never indicated his position to them like that before, though Wilbur guessed it probably had never

been necessary. “This is Phil Watson, he’s my Dad, and he’s your biological mother’s brother.”

“Hello,” Phil said softly. “It’s very nice to meet you again, Clementine. It’s been quite a long time.”

## Chapter End Notes

Clem makes a hell of a first impression, doesn't she?

# Chapter 41

## Chapter Summary

Freedom

## Chapter Notes

Read the endnotes, y'all. They're important.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You... live with my uncle,” Clementine repeated for what had to have been the thirtieth time. “My uncle, who I punched in the face. He’s your dad.”

“Yes, Clem, very good,” Tommy snarked, rolling his eyes. They were sitting on the front porch of the house, Phil, Wilbur, and Techno all inside to give them space.

“I- this is so weird. Why do you live the weirdest fucking life?” She whined.

“I mean, it’s not *that* weird. We’re less than an hour from the town you’re from.”

“The odds of you being adopted by my uncle, who I did not know was alive, by the way, are so slim it’s basically impossible.” Tommy winced.

“I uh- wasn’t adopted. I moved in last year and aged out in April.”

“Wait, what? You said he was your dad.”

“He is. Just not... like, officially.”

“Why not? He seems like the type who would have offered you the papers like 2 weeks in.”

“It was more like three months in, but I think it would have been sooner if not for-” He gestured at his scars. “Y’know, this.”

“Wait. If he offered you the papers... why...?”

“I said no,” Tommy said simply, as if it was obvious.

“You said *no*? Why the hell did you do that?” Tommy looked at her incredulously.

“What do you mean *why*? You know why.”

“I sure as fuck do *not* know why. You get the chance of a fucking lifetime and you turned it down?”

“Clem, I’ve been offered adoption papers before. I’ve *never* said yes.” She sputtered.

“When?”

“I, fuck I don’t know, at least twice when you were still in the system, once in my last home, and then here.”

“You’re fuckin’ with me, right? You could have been adopted when we were kids and you *turned it down*? ”

“Of course I did! What, was I just going to leave you on your own?”

“Yes? What the fuck. *What the fuck*. You turned down a family for *me*?”

“O’ course I did, I already had a family. I already had you, didn’t I?”

“Wha- Tommy I was fucking awful to you, what the hell were you thinking? I almost didn’t come back because I figured you’d want nothing to do with me.” And even though Tommy had thought that same thing, he felt indignation burn his chest.

“You were not! You were doing your best! You protected me!”

“Tommy, I forced you to grow up too fast, let you get shit-faced every night at 13, basically beat you into submission, the fucking abandoned you the second I turned 18.”

“You never hit me. You treated me like an equal-“

“But you weren’t my equal. You were 9 years old and had just gotten out of an abusive house and were looking for some protection and I did my damndest to turn you into a cold, unfeeling asshole like me. You were a kid.”

“So were you!”

“That... doesn’t make it right. You should hate me, for what I did to you. For taking whatever semblance of kindness and softness you had and trying to squash it out of you.”

“I could never hate you. You saved my life.”

“I didn’t. I probably fuckin’ ruined it, then I ran so I wouldn’t have to deal with the aftermath.”

“You always said you were going to go. Adventure. I never held that against you. I want the same.”

“Adventure,” she scoffed. “Yeah, some adventure it was, too, 18 months in rehab and a one-bedroom apartment and a desk job. Really adventurous, let me tell ya.”

“I mean, if you still want it, you can always come with me.”

“What... what do you mean?”

“I mean you can come with me, when I go. We can drive back to your apartment and drop your car off and go.”

“You’re *leaving*?”

“Yeah, of course, I am. It was the plan. Turn 18 and get the hell out of dodge.”

“But, you’re going to come back, right? Go to school and stay with them.” Tommy winced. “No. Tommy, you can’t be serious.”

“I’d never have expected this lecture from you of all people.”

“Why would you give this up? Those people love you, you have friends here, this is your *home* .”

“Clementine,” Tommy sighed. “This was always the plan, you know that.”

“Well, it’s a stupid fucking plan! Why can’t you just be happy?”

“It’s not like this is the fucking epitome of happiness, C. This is just some podunk town with people who kind of like me. There will be others.”

“You’re a fucking idiot. You have everything! A family, a life, a support system, and you’re, what? Throwing it away because of some stupid fuckin’ promise you made to yourself as a kid? How dense are you?!”

The front door creaked open, and Phil stuck his head out. “Are you two okay? I heard shouting.”

“Yes, we’re fine, Dad.”

“No, we fucking aren’t! Does he know?”

“He bought me the van.”

“You’re *okay with this?* ” She screeched, turning to look at Phil. He winced.

“Tommy is an adult, if he wants to leave I can’t stop him,” he said carefully.

“Un-fucking-believable,” she turned back to Tommy. “Look at him! He obviously doesn’t want you to go, and I’d bet money the other two feel the same, they love you so much and you’re still just going to bail.”

“It’s my fucking life, you don’t get a say!”

“You’re a moron,” she snapped.

“I blame it on the way I was raised.”

“Yeah, I fucking do too! Which is why I don’t understand why the fuck you’re letting the shit I did to you influence you years later! You obviously fucking know it wasn’t okay, I know you’re not stupid, so what the fuck are you doing?” Tommy clenched his teeth and stood up, brushing past Phil and storming into his room, leaving Clementine on the porch.

—

“I- sorry. I didn’t mean to-“

“It’s okay, Clementine. He’s mad right now, but once he calms down I’m sure he’ll apologize.” She nodded, tucking her knees to her chest.

“I know he will. He’ll mean it too, the bastard, but he’s not going to change his mind.” Phil sighed and sat down next to her.

“Tommy is stubborn, but he’s a *good kid*. He’ll find his way eventually.”

“He is a good kid, isn’t he? Despite my best efforts.” She glanced at him. “Has he told you about me? About what I did to him?”

“I-“ Phil paused, contemplating his next words carefully. “He has told me some things, yes. But from what I understand, you were doing your best. You made mistakes, but you were a child and doing what you thought needed to be done.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I- I’ve gone through a lot of therapy, years and years of recovery and relapse, and hating myself for what I did. I expected this trip to be more like closure. Expected him to be better now too, I guess. Seeing him freaking out at the



graduation sent me right back to when we were kids, but I've worked hard to not be that person anymore, and seeing him, knowing that damage still hasn't been repaired, it hurts."

"He has been getting better. He's healing too."

"Not well. Tell... tell me about the burn scars. He said there was a fire, but I could tell he wasn't giving me the whole story."

"Ah- well, he and Wilbur, my oldest son, had gotten into a fight, and Wil was trying to apologize by making him breakfast, but there was an accident, and it caused a grease fire. Tommy got Wil out and went back in to get Techno out, too."

"Techno is the pink-haired one?"

"Yes. But Techno wasn't actually home, and Tommy got stuck inside. He- he was very severely injured. A beam had landed on him, broke his ribs, and burned him pretty badly. He was in the hospital for quite a while, but he's recovered quite a bit. It happened nearly exactly a year ago, now, actually."

"Self-sacrificing moron," she mumbled.

"Yes, that was sort of our impression of him too. But... he didn't do it out of self-destruction, he did it because he was *selfless*. Because he cared about his brother's safety, even when he didn't claim them. He's gotten better about putting himself first, which is why we aren't trying to stop him from leaving, even though we don't want him to. His happiness is more important to us than our feelings on the matter."

"But he's not going to *be* happy, he's happy here, I can tell."

"We like to think he's happy here too, but, while we love him unconditionally and always do our best to do right by him, a lot of things have happened that probably also make him feel

unsafe staying. It has not been an easy life for him, and that didn't go away just because he found people who love him."

"Unsafe? Why would he feel unsafe?"

"I- it isn't really my place to say..."

"Please, Phil. I just want to understand," she begged.

"I- beyond the fire, Tommy also was under the impression that we were withholding food as punishment, which was just a misunderstanding and horrible miscommunication between us, but it affected him quite a bit. He also relapsed not too terribly long ago, which sent him into a severe depressive spiral that nearly ended in his- death." Phil took a deep breath. "Tommy is a wonderful person, and he is my son above all else, but I would be a fool to not know that he struggles to come to terms with the fact that he is safe with us when he's been through so much here."

"He tried to kill himself?" Phil nodded, looking out toward the road.

"His mental health tended to be extremely volatile, and it occasionally still is, though he's much better now. While we don't know for sure that his leaving will help, we can't discount the possibility that his *staying* is hindering his recovery, even if only a bit."

"It's so weird seeing him again. I thought that by now I would see him as a kid, but he just... isn't one. I mean, he is, he's barely 18, but he's so... grown."

"Techno likened him to a child soldier, once. It's been our go-to way of describing it since," Phil agreed. "He's still a kid, but he's not a child. Too much has happened for that. But whoever he is, he's still Tommy. A little immature, loyal to a fault, stubborn as an ox."

"He... when I met him, he wasn't stubborn. He used to go along with anything I'd say. When we got a little older he started challenging me, and it pissed me off like you wouldn't believe

at first, but eventually, we came to an understanding. We were never going to get anything done butting heads, so we were equals. I trusted his judgment and he trusted my advice and we both had each other's backs. But when I turned 18, I left. And I expected him to move on, to step down and heal once I stopped holding him in place, but it seems like he just took it all on his own." She ran a hand through her hair. "What stories did he tell you about me?"

"Not many. The only one he ever went into detail on was learning how to give stitches, actually." She winced.

"God, that was fucking traumatic. I spent like four hours puking after he left the room. So much blood. I should have realized then how much I'd fucked him up, his hands didn't even shake when he was doing it."

"He tells it differently."

"Oh?"

"He said you didn't flinch, and he was terrified."

"He's full of shit. He redid it like four times, I was trying to talk him through it while having a panic attack and kept giving shit instructions. When he was done he just went and washed his hands and threw his shirt away and scrubbed the floors while I hid. It's a miracle it didn't end up infected, it only didn't because he checked it every day and made sure I kept it clean." She pulled up her pant leg up past her knee to show Phil the scar, raised and white and nearly four inches long, but it honestly, looked surprisingly well healed, for being stitched by an amateur. "Frankly, the fact I didn't bleed out was almost more impressive. He probably *was* terrified, but he absolutely did not let it show."

"That sounds like him, alright. He passed out from a panic attack once and his first instinct when he woke up was to shush me and tell me it was okay." Clementine laughed bitterly.

"He does that because he got knocked unconscious once and when he came to he didn't speak a word and I gave him hell for it, told him if he was going to pass out the first words out of his mouth when he woke up better be 'everything's okay' or 'I need a hospital'."

“That... actually makes a lot of sense honestly. Clears up several things his brothers have mentioned and we’ve noticed.”

“You should also be mad at me, you know. For traumatizing your kid.”

“I mean, I’m not thrilled about it, but I also don’t blame you. You were a kid too.”

“I guess. So, you’re really my uncle?”

“I, yeah, apparently.”

—

Wilbur was reeling. He was so thrown off by the day that he was pretty sure he had whiplash. And at the center of it all, was Tommy’s... sister? Their cousin? He wasn’t sure what to call her. He expected once the shock of their first interaction wore off things would settle, that Tommy would be excited, even, but then he heard Tommy’s door slam and realized that was not the case. He made it out of his own room in record time, followed quickly by Techno, and they went together to Tommy’s door. They’d barely knocked when the door swung open and Tommy pulled them inside, shutting the door behind them.

“Hey... bud. What’s going on?” Wil tried, watching Tommy pace angrily across the floor.

“*I hate her.*” Tommy snapped, groaning.

“Is... is she different?”

“No! Yes! I don’t know. She’s just, fuck, I don’t know. I’m just mad.”

“Did she say something?”

“Yes. She gave me a lecture on how stupid it was to not take any of the adoption offers, how stupid it was for me to want to leave, she basically told me I should hate her and do the opposite of whatever she taught me for years.”

“I mean, don’t you think those things too? You said she really fucked you up.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t *mean to*. She’s acting like she intentionally hurt me, and she *didn’t*.”

“Does that matter? She still hurt you.”

“So has every other fucking person I’ve ever met! Should I hate everyone?”

“I mean...”

“You’re going to side with *her on this*? You’re my fucking brother, you’re supposed to be on my side!” Wilbur winced.

The problem was, he *agreed* with Clem. She did hurt him, and Tommy was making a mistake by leaving. And even though he wanted to hate her, to go against everything she said out of sheer pettiness, he couldn’t help but look at her and see Tommy. See someone who was hurt and had to be strong to survive, and he couldn’t help but see Dad, who tries his best to fix his mistakes and works towards being better. He couldn’t hate someone who reminded him so intrinsically of *home*.

“I’m not taking anyone’s side,”

“Get out. Now. Get out of my room.”

*“Toms, c’mon,”*

“Get out!” Wilbur left, sighing as Techno hesitated then followed.

“Thanks for the backup there, Tech.”

“I- sorry. I’m in shock I think. I have no idea what just happened. He’s mad at her for wanting what’s best for him?”

“I really don’t know. We’ll let everyone sleep on it, I guess. Come back to it in the morning.”

—

Breakfast was awkward. Clem had stayed at Phil’s insistence and was sitting directly across from Tommy and refusing to make eye contact. Tommy was glaring daggers at her.

“Tommy,” Phil chastised.

“It’s okay, Phil. He’s allowed to be mad at me,” she muttered, staring at her food. “This is really good, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Techno replied smoothly, focusing on his own food.

“Oh, you made it? I assumed super-dad was the chef,” She teased half-heartedly.

“Phil can barely use the stove,” Techno snorted.

“You call him by his first name?”

“It’s none of your business what he calls him,” Tommy snapped, and Clementine deflated.

“Okay,” she mumbled.

“I call him Dad too, I usually switch between them. It depends on the situation, I guess. We all do it. Adoption thing I think, spent a while calling him his name first, so it stuck.”

“That makes sense. I’m surprised you can’t cook, Phil. Nona would have a heart attack knowing one of her descendants doesn’t show love through soup.” Phil let out a laugh.

“She never taught me, I didn’t have any of the recipes until Tommy gave them to me at Christmas after he realized you taught them to him.” Tommy stiffened.

“You remembered them?” She asked excitedly, looking at him with a fond smile.

“Yeah, of course, I did. They ended up sick and I made them the soup, that’s how we figured it out. Apparently ginger and turmeric aren’t typical ingredients for chicken soup.”

“Oh, no they aren’t, but they help settle the stomach.”

“Yes, I know.” She sighed at his flat tone.

“C’mon, Chirp, I know you’re mad but-“ She was cut off by Wilbur choking on his drink.

“You call him *Chirp*? ” She giggled.

“He’s like a little bird, he used to make this noise-“

“Clem, shut the fuck up.”

“No! He- he loved whistling back at the birds, trying to mimic their sounds, and he would chirp at the babies and whistle at them when they were crying, it was so *cute*,”

“Clementine.”

“Oh, come *on* , at least let me tell them about the-“

“Stop,” He choked out, and when she took a second to actually look at him, he was shaking violently, clenching his fork so tightly it was cutting into his palm.

“Oh, shit- sorry, I didn’t mean to-“

“No, no it’s not you, I just- not little bird, okay? Tell them the story later.” She reached a hand out, thought better of it, and sat it palm up on the table.

“It never bothered you before- why...?”

“It’s a long story, I don’t want to get into it.” She nodded.

“Okay. Do you need to count?” Tommy almost laughed at her soft tone.

“I’m not panicking.”



“You could have fooled me,” She replied flatly.

“It’s not panic, I promise. It’s just a lot.”

And it wasn’t panic, it was grief, he thought. He was mourning something and he didn’t know what. Was he mourning his sister, who was sitting across from him but still somehow a stranger? Mourning the kid he used to be? Mourning someone who he didn’t know but *knew* he should? He didn’t have an answer.

“Tommy? Are you dissociating?” Phil asked.

“I- don’t know. I usually know, don’t I?”

“Yes, you usually know, but it’s okay if you don’t. Would you like to lie down? I can help you to the couch.”

“Yes, please.”

“What’s happening?” Clementine asked, clearly freaking out.

“It’s okay. He’s going to be okay, he does this sometimes, it’s a trauma response.”

“He didn’t do this before,” She hissed, following them into the living room where Tommy was staring at his hands. “Tommy, can you hear me?” He looked at her and smiled, holding out a hand for her. She came and sat down next to him, Wil and Tech right behind.

“Hello,” he said airily. “I thought you were dead, y’know. I never told anyone that but I was so sure of it, for ages. I miss you.”

“I’m right here, bud.” He laid his head on her shoulder.

“I still miss you, though.” She wrapped her arms around him and tucked her face into his hair to hide her tears.

“I miss you too.”

—

Tommy came back in pieces. Slowly clicking back together, remembering that he was real and whole again. When he did, it was dark out, and frustration was burning like acid in his throat. Clementine was asleep, curled up next to him, and the rest of his family was gone, likely in their own rooms. Tommy carefully stood, not giving himself time to overthink, and made it to his own room, where his bags were already packed and ready to go. He sighed, hauling them down the stairs silently and out to the van. Once they were tucked away, he went back inside, checked the time, just past 3:30 AM, got the coffee pot ready for Dad in the morning, sat out written instructions for how to make Wilbur’s tea the way he liked it for Techno, tucked a blanket around Clem, and headed back out the door. When he turned the key in the ignition, his hands did not shake. When he rolled down the windows, he smiled. When he pulled out of the driveway, he thought of the last year, of all the changes that had come from this town. When he passed Tubbo’s house, he waved at the dark windows and laughed.

When he made it onto the highway, a full tank of gas, westbound with no destination in mind, he felt *free* .

## Chapter End Notes

Guys. Y'all.

It's.. it's finished.

I cannot believe it.

I'm sure y'all are beyond frustrated at this ending. This was always meant to be Schrodinger's fic, with both a happy and sad ending until you open the box. This is the Canonical end, I will never clarify what is the true ending.

That being said, I plan on writing both endings, I'll make this a series or something and I'll make sure they're clearly marked with which is which. Keep an eye out for them, if you decide you want to open the box.

I've worked on this every day since April 14th, so it's so bizarre that it's finally over. I'm having a meltdown. Thank you so much for the love and support you all have thrown my way over the last few months, I cannot thank you enough for that. I love y'all.

## Author's note

### Chapter Summary

This is not a chapter

Hello all!

this isn't a chapter, just some housekeeping stuff.

one: I made a Twitter! Feel free to scream at me there [@FrownChelsea](#) . I don't know how to use Twitter so we'll see.

two: there are Spotify playlists for this now!

[This is from my Partner!](#)

[This is from @sleeby pois on Twitter!](#)

They're both amazing!!

thank you guys so much for all the support. The bonus endings are available in the series!

## End Notes

I made a Twitter! You can scream at me there! It's @frownchelsea !

this is being written for My husband and I's partner for their birthday! Our love language in this house is apparently "Write you fanfic for your hyperfixations"

Comment if you like!

Feel free to write your own endings to this btw, make sure to let me know you're doing it, I'd love read y'all takes.

Works inspired by this one

[Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right, but Three Just Might](#) by [smolartist11](#)

[Noches como estas](#) by [ScapeSystem](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!